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01

TRIGGER WARNING: mention of domestic violence

Rowan Warner

I should have known the minute I stepped into the backyard it would be an interrogation.

I wasn't left with much of a choice. If I canceled on my mom's family cookout, she would've sent one of my brothers over to my apartment to drag me here. She didn't take last minute canceling lightly.

So either way, I would have ended up standing in front of my family with a bruised face as my mom shot questions at me and my niece and nephew tried climbing up my legs.

"Rowan!" Mom exclaimed, putting down a platter and rushing over to me as I bent down to be eye level with the kids. "What happened to your face? Where did you get that bruise? Have you iced it?"

I hugged my niece and nephew, who I hadn't seen for over a month. I hadn't seen most of my family in about a month. That was when things started getting really bad and I couldn't let any of them see me like that. Until now.

"Ma, I'm fine," I told her, standing up to my full height. She gripped my face and brought it level with hers, eyeing my bruise like she would be able to make it go away with just a glance.

"This looks bad, Rowan," she said, shaking her head. "What happened?"

"I was... hanging some stuff up at the apartment, smacked my face real good," I told her. A lie. And by the look on her face, she knew it.

"He's fine, Gem," Dad spoke up from where he stood at the grill. "We get bruises like that all the time at the shop. It's nothing."

"Rowan doesn't work at the shop, he works at a bank."

Dad rolled his eyes at that.

It wasn't like I could work at the family business even if I wanted to, which I didn't. The only ones who worked there at the moment where my older brothers Dean and Adam and the youngest, Cade. The oldest siblings, the twins, Charlie and Camilla, tried to work there for a while, but working for our father was hell.

Dad owned a small auto shop that everyone in town went to when they were having car trouble. He knew everybody in our town and that was good for business. As soon as Charlie and Camilla were old enough to work, he had them in the shop. Neither of them lasted long. Camilla hated working on cars and Charlie hated working for Dad.

Dad had to wait four more years until Dean was old enough to work for him and then another two for Adam. By the time it was my turn, I had shown such disinterest that Dad hadn't even bothered to teach me anything about cars and forced me to work in the office. It was hell and I got out of there as soon as possible.

My youngest brother, Cade, was only a senior in high school but he was already working for Dad, and from what I heard, he was planning on staying.

"Mom, seriously, I'm fine," I assured her, though she looked like she didn't believe me.

"Okay," she relented, taking her hands away from my face. "Where's Brendan? He's not coming?"

I didn't have the heart to tell her that not only had Brendan been the one to put the bruise on my face, and every other bruise on my body, but I had broken up with him and now had no idea where I was going to live.

"He's busy. He can't make it," I told her with a strained smile before walking over to where the rest of my family, and Graham Beckett, sat.

Graham Beckett. My brother Adam's best friend and honorary member of the Warner family. My parents had practically adopted him when we were kids since he was over our house all the time. With his parents always fighting, and eventually his father leaving his mother to take care of their son all by herself, Graham spent a lot of time across the street at our house. He even got welcomed into the family business and worked for my dad along with Adam, Dean, and Cade.

"Sorry, who are you again?" my older brother Charlie called out as I made my way over to the table. "Is Rowan finally gracing us with his presence?"

I rolled my eyes, sitting down across from him and his wife Ally.

"Hey, you're the one that's been MIA for a month," my sister Camilla added from beside Charlie. "I'm surprised you even showed up today."

"Mom would've never let him bail today," Dean said from beside me, leaning back in his chair and taking a sip of beer.

Adam sat on the other side of me with Graham beside him. Graham leaned around Adam to wave at me.

"And you didn't even bring Brendan," Camilla added, taking a sip of wine.

I didn't know when would be the best time to tell my family that I had broken up with Brendan the night before and had been planning on living in a hotel until I could find a new apartment. No time seemed like a good time. Brendan was liked by my family because he was charming and good at hiding who he really was.

"What were you telling mom about how you got that bruise?" Dean asked, pointing at my face. "You were hanging something? You know I'd go over there and do that for you."

I fought the urge to roll my eyes for the second time since sitting down.

"I can do things for myself," I told him.

Dean chuckled. "Obviously not if you gave yourself a fucking bruise like that."

Adam turned to me for the first time since I arrived. He raised an eyebrow at me and then turned back to talk to Graham. That was probably the only greeting I would get out of him.

A moment later, Camilla's husband, Jared, came over to the table holding their son, Jeremy, upside down.

"He told me he wanted to come see Uncle Rowan," Jared said, bringing Jeremy over to me.

I smiled and stood up from my seat, standing behind Adam and Graham. I lifted Jeremy up above my head and he started uncontrollably laughing. This sight simultaneously made me happy and extremely sad. I wished I had spent more time with my family, particularly my nieces and nephews, over the last month. I hated that my absence made them miss me.

"What the fuck, Row!" Adam exclaimed, turning completely around in his seat and lifting my shirt up to reveal the bruising I had on my stomach. My shirt must have lifted slightly when I held Jeremy up and Adam had noticed the bruises hidden by my shirt.

I quickly placed Jeremy back on the ground and tugged my shirt out of Adam's grip.

"What the hell is all that?" Adam demanded, lifting up my shirt again for everyone to see.

"Fuck off, Adam," I spat, shoving his hand away from me before sitting back in my seat. "Just stop."

"Did you and Brendan get into it?" he asked.

"Adam!" Camilla exclaimed with a glare, throwing a chip at him from across the table.

I felt everyone's eyes on me, but I didn't let it faze me. If I kept calm, everyone else would too. Or so I thought until Mom rushed over to the table with wide eyes.

"Rowan," she said, scurrying over to me. She took my face in her hand as she stood between Dean and me. "I knew there was something going on with Brendan! He did this to you?"

"Mom, it's fine—"

"It's not fine!" she cut me off.

"What the hell is going on?" Dad shouted, walking over to the table with a platter of steaks.

"Nothing," I said before anyone else could speak. "Let's just get through dinner. Please."

Mom glared at me but ultimately nodded.

"We will be talking about this after," she said, walking away.

I sighed and sat back down, knocking into Adam's shoulder.

"Thanks a lot," I sarcastically remarked, everyone's eyes still on me.

Adam raised his eyebrows but didn't say anything.

"What the hell did I miss?" Cade asked, walking out of the house. I glanced over at him. "I heard all this yelling."

"Don't worry about it," I told him.

Dinner afterward went on as to be expected. Dad tried making normal conversation, but Mom was so concerned about whatever was going on with me that she couldn't participate. She just stared at me the whole time with sad eyes while all the others tried to go along with Dad.

As soon as we were finished, I helped Mom clear the table with Cade while Dad and the others went inside.

"We're having a family meeting about this," Mom said, stacking plates.

"Mom," I groaned. "We don't need to involve everyone. Seriously."

"Family meeting about what?" Cade asked, moving to stand next to me. "That big bruise on your face?"

"Cade," Mom called out. "You can go in the other room with Ally to watch the kids."

Cade immediately shook his head. "No, I wanna be in on this family meeting."

We finished clearing the table and brought everything inside to the kitchen. I was about to start doing the dishes, anything to stall my mother's plans, but she caught onto me and dragged me away from the sink and into the living room.

Everyone was sitting around the TV except for Ally and the kids. Dad sat in his recliner in the center of the room, the remote in his hand and his finger on the channel arrow like he couldn't decide if this was what he wanted. Mom walked over to him and ripped the remote out of his hand, turning the TV off.

"Gem," Dad complained but didn't move to take the remote back.

"I told you we're having a meeting," she said, standing in front of the TV to look at everyone.

I sighed and took a seat on the arm of the couch beside where Cade had sat down. He leaned over and whispered something to Dean, presumably to ask what this was about. Dean shushed him just before Mom continued.

"We need to have this meeting because I'm afraid if we don't, Rowan will end up seriously hurt," Mom said, clasping her hands together as she looked at me.

This meeting was beginning to feel more like an intervention.

"We all need to be on the same page and support Rowan to help him through this," Mom continued. She was being vague, but it didn't matter. Everyone had seen the bruises on me earlier and knew exactly what they were from.

I glared over at Adam who was sitting between Charlie and Graham on the other couch across from where I was sitting. He never cared much about me or my life, but he chose to care about this and now I was in this mess with Mom.

"Gem, I think Rowan can handle himself," Dad replied, placing his hand on his forehead. "He's a man. He can fight back."

"Dad!" Camilla exclaimed from where she sat on the loveseat with Jared. "He shouldn't have to fight back."

I leaned back on the couch. Cade looked at me with confusion, then gestured to his face where the bruise on mine would be. He mouthed "Brendan?"

"I don't want my baby having to fight back!" Mom exclaimed angrily. "He has to get out of that apartment."

I could already tell where this was going and I didn't like it one bit. I loved my parents, but there was no way I was moving back in with them. The fact that I was able to move out for college and find an apartment with Brendan as soon as I graduated was a blessing.

"Mom, I'm way ahead of you," I told her. "I already decided I'm moving out. I'm just going to stay in a hotel until—"

"A hotel?" she screeched.

Dad rolled his eyes. "You're not staying in a hotel, Rowan."

This caused a commotion from everyone in the room. Now they were all talking about where I could stay in the meantime, except for Adam. He sat

there quietly with his arms crossed over his chest while Graham whispered something in his ear.

"You have all these options of where you could stay and you decided on a fucking hotel?" Dean asked, leaning over Cade to talk to me.

"I didn't want to panic anyone," I said. "Or be a bother. I'm fine."

I also didn't want to stay with anyone in my family. Dean lived with three other guys. Their house was cramped enough as it was. And Charlie and Camilla both had their own families, and as much as I loved the kids, I wouldn't want to live with them. I could see myself practically becoming a live in babysitter. And living with Adam and Graham was out of the question. Their house only had three bedrooms and they had another roommate. Not to mention, Adam would never agree to it.

"A bother?" Dean looked like he was about to start screaming at me until Charlie got everyone's attention.

"Wait, wait!" Charlie exclaimed, getting everyone to quiet down and look to him. "Adam, did you say you and Graham were looking for another roommate?"

"Oh, yes! That would be perfect!" Mom excitedly agreed.

"Um, yeah, we're still looking," Adam awkwardly answered.

I didn't like where this was going. Not at all. There was no way Adam would deny me a place to live in front of our whole family, but as soon as we were alone, he would make it known he didn't want me in his house. And I didn't want to be there anyway.

"This is perfect!" Mom repeated. "Rowan can be your new roommate. He can get out of his apartment and you don't have to look for another roommate!"

"Mom," I interjected. "I don't know if Adam and Graham want me to be their roommate. I'll be fine."

"Don't be ridiculous, Rowan," she said, waving me off.

Graham shrugged while Adam sat beside him looking miserable.

"I don't mind as long as we have someone to pay a third of the rent," Graham said.

"Then it's settled," Mom decided with a wide grin. "Rowan will move in with Adam and Graham. And Dean and Adam will go with him tomorrow to help him move out of his apartment."

"We have work tomorrow," Adam reminded her.

"You father will give you an extended lunch," she said, looking toward Dad. "Right, Chuck?"

"Yeah, yeah, give me the remote," he replied.

That was all that was said about it for the rest of the evening.

**

Welcome to my new book!

Please leave your thoughts!

02

Rowan Warner

When I pulled up to the apartment the next day, Dean and Adam were already there waiting for me. I circled the parking lot, making sure Brendan's car wasn't there before I parked the car and got out to greet my brothers.

They were both leaning against Dean's car in their mechanic uniforms. Dean pushed off the car when he saw me and made his way over to me.

"You got a lot of stuff to get?" he asked. "Will we need to make more than one trip?"

I shook my head. "No it's not a lot. Most of it is already in my car. I just have to get some more clothes and my books and things."

Dean nodded then motioned toward Adam for him to follow us into the apartment. I led them to the elevator and then to the door and unlocked it. When we walked in, everything looked exactly how I had left it the day before. I didn't know why I had been expecting anything different, but the fact that it looked the same unnerved me. It felt like since I was leaving, it should look different.

I wasn't even going to bother to take the things I had used to decorate our living space. I would leave him with most of my candles and my ceramic statues that I placed on shelves. Brendan had gotten me a mini ceramic statue of *David* that was open on top so I could put flowers in it. It was still on the TV stand where I had left it, the flowers inside it starting to wilt.

I brought Dean and Adam into the bedroom and started pulling my clothes out of the closet and placing them into one of my plastic bins.

"Anything you need out in the living room?" Dean asked while Adam sat down on the bed.

I thought back on all my little knick knacks. I didn't need those anymore and they were tainted anyway. They were here in a home I shared with Brendan, and I couldn't put them in any other home I had.

"No," I told him. "That can all stay. I'll see if some of my books are in there, but I kept most of those in here."

"Are those all yours?" Adam asked, pointing at the bookshelf in the corner of the room.

The bookshelf I had built. It was five shelves filled to the brim with books. Most, if not all of them, were mine. Brendan mostly read on his e-reader and any of the physical books he did own, he didn't put them on my shelf.

"Yeah, those should be all mine," I said and Adam let out a huff, heaving himself off the bed.

"Jesus Christ, Row, there's like a hundred books here," he complained, walking over to the shelf.

"We'll get all the books in boxes," Dean said. "You get your clothes and anything else you need."

With that, Adam and Dean took another plastic bin I had and started packing my books away. After I got the rest of my clothes packed, I rummaged through the night stand and dresser to look for anything that was mine. When everything in the bedroom was in the boxes, I looked through the bathroom.

And then I heard the door open and close and foot steps sounded through the living room.

"Fuck," I muttered, closing the bathroom closet and moving out to the living room to find Brendan standing there.

"This is what you're doing then?" he asked me. "You're just going to come here while I'm not home and move all your shit out? Without saying anything?"

"I already told you I was done with this," I said. "You knew this was coming. Don't act like I'm just walking out on you."

"Rowan, I already apologized to you," Brendan said, taking a step closer to me. "You know I get angry sometimes, and I'm working on it—"

"And you're going to work on it without me," I said, crossing my arms over my chest. "What are you doing here anyway?"

"I saw you come home on the Ring camera."

I mentally cursed at myself for not thinking of that before coming. Though, I didn't think Brendan would show up just because he saw me enter the apartment.

"Where are you going to go, Rowan?" Brendan asked, looking concerned. "Do you even have a place to stay?"

"That's none of your concern."

That concerned look on his face turned into a look of anger. His mouth turned down in a frown and he came even closer to me.

"You're not even going to hear me out?" he spat. "Or let me be concerned for you? I made a mistake and you're going to hold it over me forever?"

I didn't say anything to that and he looked around the room at all of my things still decorating the space.

"You're not going to take your stupid fucking candles?" he hissed, picking one up and dropping it on the ground so it shattered. I winced. "Or this stupid ugly statue I got you?"

He picked up the *David* statue and threw it toward me. The statue shattered on the wall right by my head, glass hitting me and cutting my face.

"Hey!" Dean exclaimed, rushing out of the bedroom with Adam close behind him.

Dean went right over to Brendan and started pushing him toward the door. The two were pretty evenly matched in height and weight, but Dean was stronger. Adam stood beside me with an unreadable look as he took in the new injuries on my face.

"You need to leave," Dean seethed.

"You can't kick me out of my own apartment," Brendan argued before looking back at me. "You brought body guards with you?"

"Clearly you can't be trusted," Dean answered, bringing Brendan's attention back to him. "You hid this side of you from us the whole time you two were together and you thought you would get away with it, but you're not. So I suggest you leave while we get the rest of Rowan's things and then you can never contact him again."

Brendan just shook his head and pulled himself out of Dean's grasp before turning and leaving the apartment, slamming the door shut behind him.

"Are you okay?" Dean asked me.

"I'm just going to go clean my face and we can leave," I said, turning to go back to the bathroom.

"Was that yours?" Dean asked, gesturing toward the shattered glass on the floor. "Are all these yours? I know you like those marble head things or whatever."

"I don't need them," I said and left the room.

Once I cleaned up the small scrapes and made sure there was no glass in my skin, I went back to the living room where Dean and Adam were packing away the statues and candles. I let out a sigh.

"I said I didn't need those," I told them.

"But they're yours and you like them," Dean replied as he wrapped the last one in paper and put it in the box.

"You're not putting them in our living room," Adam said, earning a glare and a smack in the shoulder from Dean.

"Adam," he snapped.

"It's fine, let's go," I said, grabbing the box from Dean and going down to the cars.

It took us two trips to get all the boxes filled with my things, and it took a lot of moving and rearranging to get everything to fit in both cars, but we eventually got everything in and made our way to Adam and Graham's house.

Adam led the way up to the room I would be staying in and we put all the boxes on the floor.

The room was not as big as the one I previously shared with Brendan, but it was a good size for just me. The queen sized bed was in the center of the room with a bedside table on each side. The dresser was across from the end of the bed like it doubled as a TV stand only there was no TV on top. The walls were an off white color and they were bare and there were two windows on the same wall the opposite side of the door.

"You need help unpacking?" Dean asked as Adam leaned against the doorframe.

"No, thanks though," I replied. "You can go back to work."

Dean nodded and made his way toward where Adam stood. Adam pulled something out of his pocket and held it out to me.

"Your house key," he said and I grabbed it from his hand. "I'll be home a little after five. Graham is working through lunch for me so he's getting out earlier."

"Okay."

With that, Adam left and went downstairs. Dean lingered, watching as Adam left before turning back to me.

"He's just moody," Dean said. "He'll come around."

I wasn't too sure about that, and I couldn't really blame Adam that much for it anyway. He was practically forced into letting me crash with him and the two of us weren't exactly the closest of siblings. We never really got along and he was annoyed by nearly everything I did. The two of us spent our whole lives sharing a room, so I was sure the last thing he wanted to was for me to be living with him.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Dean asked, pulling me from my thoughts. "With everything, with what just happened with Brendan... I can call Dad and tell him I'm going to stay with you if you want me to."

"I'm fine, Dean, really," I assured him. "I dealt with a lot worse with Brendan. That was nothing."

Dean pressed his lips tightly together.

"That doesn't make me feel any better."

"I'm fine," I repeated. "And I could use some time alone to unpack. Don't worry about me."

After a few more minutes, Dean seemed to believe me and the two of us went downstairs where Adam was waiting for him. The two of them left a minute later and as soon as I was alone, I threw myself down on the couch and took a nap.

My nap was short lived, and when I woke up, the last thing I wanted to do was unpack, so I went to the kitchen to look for something to eat and groaned when I realized Adam and Graham had no idea how to grocery shop. Their cabinets were almost completely empty except for a container of protein powder and a box of poptarts. The fridge and freezer weren't much better. They had some frozen raw meat in the freezer and a few yogurts and some milk in the fridge.

I closed the fridge and pulled my keys out of my pocket before heading to the grocery store.

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Later on, I was lying on the couch watching TV with one of my candles lit on the coffee table when Graham walked into the house. He looked surprised to see me for a moment before the realization hit him.

"What's up?" he asked, taking his shoes off by the door.

I was glad he at least had the manners to do that. I was sure Adam just walked into the house with his work boots on and dragged in all sorts of mud and dirt and oil from the shop inside.

"Nothing," I replied.

Graham walked into the living room and glanced at me with a strange expression.

"What's that smell?" he asked.

"Pine. It's a candle."

"Oh."

He left the living room and went toward the kitchen.

"Are you hungry?" he called out. "We don't have much, but I can— oh."

Graham came back into the living room.

"Where did all that food come from?" he asked, pointing his thumb back toward the kitchen.

"I went grocery shopping."

I stood up from the couch and blew the candle out before going toward Graham and standing in front of him.

"You guys had, like, no food," I said. "I don't know how you were surviving."

Graham shrugged. "Take out and cereal mostly."

I nodded, not knowing what else to say to Graham. He and I never talked much growing up. Adam was too busy picking on me and enlisting Graham for help. Graham was probably just as annoyed as Adam to have me in his house.

"Well, I already ate, so don't worry about cooking enough for me," I told him before heading up the stairs to my bedroom.

I was dreading unpacking all my boxes. I had only opened the one with the candles in it and took out the first one I found. The rest had remained closed and sitting on my bedroom floor.

Part of me was too afraid to unpack all of my things. I knew this living situation was temporary, and I had no idea how long it would actually last, so I didn't want to unpack all of my belongings if I was only going to be here for a few weeks.

I started with my clothes, figuring that was what I needed the most out of everything I had. It took me a while to hang things up in the closet and fold other things to put in the dresser. By the time I was done, Adam had gotten home and I was on my way downstairs to get a drink when I heard him talking to Graham.

"I told him not to put his shit in here," Adam snapped, annoyance clear in his tone.

"It's just a candle, Adam," Graham replied.

"Do we look like the type of guys that fucking light candles all over the house?"

"I guess not, but Rowan is," Graham said. "Don't you want him to feel at home here?"

I didn't have to see Adam to know he rolled his eyes at that.

"This isn't his home. This is temporary," Adam told him. "He'll be out of here when he finds his own place."

"I hope you're not rushing him out of here."

"I'm not," Adam denied. "I haven't talked to him about it yet. Why do you care? Since when do you like Rowan?"

"I like everyone in your family and I like that he's going to pay a third of rent and utilities," Graham replied. "And he just stocked the fridge. And he's your brother. You should want to help him out."

"That's why I am helping him out. For now."

"You need to loosen up a little," Graham told him. "It's not like your mom pawned Cade off on us. Rowan's an adult and he's going to take care of himself and do his own thing."

I went the rest of the way down the stairs and when I entered the living room, Adam and Graham's eyes were on me. Graham looked between us and left the room, jogging up the stairs to presumably his own bedroom.

"I won't be here long, Adam, don't worry about it," I assured him. "I'll start looking for a new apartment tomorrow. I know you got stuck with me because of Mom."

Adam just stared at me with his arms crossed over his chest.

"And I'll take my fucking candle upstairs if it's that important to you," I added.

He didn't respond, so I pushed past him and went into the kitchen.

**

Thanks for reading!

Leave your thoughts.

03

Rowan Warner

As if my life couldn't get any worse, the next morning on my way to work, I had a flat tire. So I was stranded on the side of the road at eight in the morning. I let out a loud groan when I got out of the car to see my back tire was flat, banging my hand on the side of the car in frustration as I pulled my phone out to call Dad.

"Rowan," Dad answered. That was how he always answered the phone to anyone. It was never a greeting, always their name. Unless it was a number he didn't recognize, then it was "yes?" or "what?"

"Dad, I have a flat tire," I told him.

"Where are you?"

"On Becker Street, just before the intersection," I said.

"I'll send one of the boys to change your tire," he replied.

"Thank you."

After we hung up, I got back in the car and waited. I was probably the only of my Dad's kids that didn't know how to change a tire, but it wasn't for lack of trying on his part. He wanted me to learn at least the basics of car maintenance, but I never showed interest. Me and cars just didn't get along.

It was only about twenty minutes later when someone from the shop showed up. I got out of the car, expecting to see Dean or Adam, but was instead greeted by Graham.

"Oh, hi," I said.

"Hi, can you pop the trunk?" he asked, gesturing toward the back of the car. I pressed the button on my key and Graham got to work, pulling the spare tire out of the back.

It was warm this morning and Graham was wearing a gray t-shirt with his mechanic pants, his skin glistening in the sunlight and his brown curls falling over his forehead.

I tried to keep my eyes off him as he worked. I didn't need to be thinking about Graham's glistening skin or how good he looked in what he was wearing. Not only was it weird since we were roommates now, but Adam would kill me if he ever found out.

He jacked the car up and got the lug nuts off before replacing the tire. I backed off when I realized I was standing right behind him, watching the way his muscles moved under his shirt.

God, what was wrong with me?

Graham stood up to his full height once the spare was on and picked up my flat tire with him before turning to face me.

"There, you're all set," he said. "I'll take this to work and see if I can patch it up."

"Thanks, Graham," I replied. "Sorry my dad sent you out here. I was expecting Dean or Adam."

Graham shrugged. "It's no big deal."

I didn't think anything of it when Graham followed me to the front of the car and watched as I turned it on. Then he nodded when he looked at the dashboard.

"Your Dad told me to check your mileage because he thinks you're way overdue for an oil change," Graham explained. "He was right."

"How can you even tell?"

"He keeps track of your mileage every time you get it changed," he told me. "You should've gotten it done, like, two months ago."

I let out a sigh. "Can it wait?"

"I would say yes, but I'm on orders from Chuck to make you go to the shop if you're overdue."

"Fine."

Graham tapped twice on the hood of my car before walking back to his, my tire in hand. The two of us drove back to the shop. Graham brought his car around back while I just parked mine in front of one of the garage doors and walked inside.

"Rowan, I told you not to park in front of the bay," Dad scolded as soon as I walked inside.

"You're going to move it anyway." I didn't even know what the bay was, so how was I supposed to know not to park there?

Graham walked through the shop from the back, holding my tire in one hand.

"Want me to change the oil?" he asked Dad.

He shook his head. "Adam can do it. Adam!"

Adam walked in with a blank face, like he knew what Dad was about to ask of him.

"Go change the oil in Rowan's car," Dad told him.

My brother glared over at me and held out his hand for my keys.

"I can try to patch this tire," Graham said to Dad, showing it to him.

"Just get him a new one," Dad replied.

Adam scoffed before letting out a humorless chuckle.

"What, Adam?" I asked, raising my eyebrows at him.

"You just getting free oil changes and free brand new tires," Adam said, shaking his head. "It's just funny."

"Just go do what I asked you to do and keep your mouth shut while you do it," Dad snapped and Adam snatched the keys out of my hand without a word before going back outside to get my car.

Graham shot me a look I couldn't decipher before turning around and going further into the shop.

"What's Adam's problem?" I asked, leaning back against the wall.

"He likes to just do what he wants and not be told what to do," Dad replied. "He needs to realize he does what I tell him to do when we're here."

That was why I could never work for my Dad full time. I spent my whole life being bossed around by him as a child. I didn't need it all throughout my adult life too. Adam had the same feelings, I was sure, but he chose this. That was his own fault.

"Did you tell your boss you're going to be late?" Dad asked me.

"Yeah, she knows," I replied, pulling my phone out of my pocket. I had another text from my boss, Janet, that just said "bring coffee."

"You have to keep track of your mileage so you know when to get an oil change," Dad said. "I'm going to have Adam write it down for you. Your car needs an oil change every five thousand miles."

"I didn't even know I drove that much," I said.

"Well, you did."

I supposed that could have been true. Brendan and I always took my car whenever we went somewhere, and we had taken a few trips together over

the years. I just hadn't realized it amounted to that much.

Dad and I waited together for Adam to finish up with my car. To my surprise, it was Graham who brought my keys back to me.

"I put your new tire on," Graham said, handing me the keys.

"Adam could've done that," Dad said in a scolding tone.

"It was no problem," Graham said with a shrug just as Adam walked back inside.

"I hope Adam was the one to change the oil like I asked," Dad said with a pointed expression.

"Yes, Dad," Adam responded. "I changed the oil. You never asked me to put the tire on."

"I'm gonna head to work," I interjected before Dad could get angry. "Thanks for the oil and the tire. See you guys at home."

When I finally made it to work, coffees in hand, it was close to ten o'clock. I walked into Janet's office and held her coffee up for her to see.

"Finally!" she said, standing from her desk to grab it from me. "I mean, I know you had a bad morning, but I was really needing this." She took a sip then looked at me with a smile.

"Yeah, I had quite the morning," I said, taking a sip of my own coffee.

"Did you hit yourself in the face with a tire iron or something?" she asked, gesturing towards my bruise.

"Oh, no, that's from something else." I didn't elaborate, and thankfully, she didn't ask me to. "You think I can change my own tire?"

She laughed, sitting down on the edge of her desk. "If I can do it, you can do it."

"I don't need to do it, everyone in my family can do it. I have options."

"True."

After some small talk, I made my way to my own office. My office was on the other side of Janet's and all the walls were a see through glass, so I could see everyone in the bank. I had worked here as a teller throughout college and got hired as a banker after I graduated. If I wanted to move up in the ranks and get higher pay, I would have to go for my Master's, but I didn't know if this was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life.

Luckily my horrible morning didn't make me miss any of the meetings I had scheduled for the day. I was supposed to be helping someone with securing a loan and later on helping someone with opening an account with our bank.

After we closed up, Janet and I went shopping because I wanted to get some new sheets so I wouldn't have to use Adam's extras for another night. Janet just wanted to come along because she was some type of shopaholic.

"So you're living with your brother now?" Janet asked, sipping on her second coffee of the day. "What happened with Brendan?"

"We broke up."

She didn't say anything to that, and I could tell she had an idea about why the two of us broke up. She at least had the decency not to bring it up.

"So now I'm stuck with Adam for the time being," I said, looking through the sheets. "And he's not happy about it."

"No offense, but Adam seems like kinda an asshole," Janet replied, picking up a sheet set and showing it to me. I shook my head at her pick and she put it back.

"He is, but I get it kinda," I said. "We've never really gotten along and we shared a room throughout our entire childhood. He finally got away from me and now I'm living in his house. Well, it's not even his house. He rents."

"Still, you're his brother and you needed a place to stay," she continued. "He should cut you a little slack and try to get along with you. You're adults! You two should be able to handle living together."

"It's not even just us, his best friend lives there too," I told her. "He should at least be a little bit of a buffer, but Adam's still pissed off."

"Best friend?" Janet asked with a smirk. "Is he an attractive best friend?"

I rolled my eyes but laughed anyway. "Yes, but it doesn't matter. He's so off limits. He's Adam's best friend and has been since we were kids, practically part of the family. And he's straight. Probably."

"There's a probably there."

"And he barely tolerates me. He's just nicer than Adam."

"I bet it would really piss Adam off if you fucked his best friend," Janet said, grinning over the lid of her coffee cup.

I laughed. "It would. And it's not gonna happen."

"You never know."

I finally picked out new sheets, a comforter, and pillows and I was relieved I wouldn't have to use the extras that Adam had given me. There was something about using someone else's sheets that freaked me out and I couldn't wait to wash these and put them on my bed.

Janet and I parted ways after I bought my things and I headed back to the house. Adam and Graham's cars were both in the driveway when I pulled in. I parked off to the side so I wouldn't block either of them in and brought my things inside.

When I walked in, the two of them were sitting in the living room with a pizza box on the table in front of them. There was only one slice left and Adam was about to take it, then paused when he saw me walk in.

"We have a house full of food and you two are eating pizza?" I asked them, taking my shoes off and putting them into the hall closet and placing my bags down on the floor. I wouldn't even comment on the fact that they didn't save me any, not that I wanted pizza.

"We worked all day," Adam said with a deadpanned expression. "We don't feel like cooking."

"I worked all day too and I'm going to cook something," I replied.

"You sit at a desk all day, we do physical labor, it's not the same thing."

This wasn't the first time that Adam acted like my job wasn't as important as his or that I didn't work as hard as he did. My dad acted the same way. They thought just because I worked a desk job, I wasn't actually working.

I scoffed. "Okay, Adam."

When I walked into the kitchen, I pulled out some of the food I had bought yesterday, getting ready to make a stir fry. What Adam didn't realize was that just because I was in the kitchen, didn't mean I couldn't hear him. That was why he decided to start complaining to Graham about me. Again.

"I told you he was gonna be like this," Adam said. "He thinks he's so much better than me. He's going to disrupt our lives."

"You're being dramatic," Graham replied with a laugh. "Look at it this way, we have someone we know, who has a good job and we know can pay a third of rent and utilities, instead of some weirdo we found on the internet living with us. This could be a lot worse than it is."

"We could've found someone we liked to pay a third," Adam countered.

"We both know that wasn't working out," Graham said. "You're too picky with everyone we talked to about rooming with us."

"If I wasn't picky, you'd let just anyone move in here," Adam shot back.

"If you weren't so picky, we wouldn't have had to have been going half on rent for the last two months since John moved out."

Adam sighed. "I just want to room with someone I actually want to live with. Not a weirdo. Not Rowan. I spent my whole life sharing a room with him. I know all his annoying quirks. I know way too much about him. And the sooner he finds his own place, the better."

"Adam, you could save the shit talking for when I'm not here!" I shouted from the kitchen. That shut Adam and Graham up.

Adam walked into the kitchen and leaned against the door frame.

"I don't say anything that I wouldn't say to your face," he told me.

"Trust me, I know." I was in the middle of washing the rice I was using for my stir fry and Adam came up behind me to see what I was doing.

"What the hell is that?"

"Rice."

"You wash rice?"

I let out a deep breath. "Yes, Adam."

I had to remind myself that I was talking to someone who probably never cooked anything for himself in his life.

"I'll make enough for you if you want some," I offered.

"Nah," Adam replied. "Graham might want some though."

Adam left the kitchen and I finished cooking. As I was eating at the kitchen table, Graham came into the room and looked at the pan on the stove.

"What's this?" he asked.

"Stir fry," I said. "I'm not going to eat all of it if you want some."

Graham responded by taking a fork and plucking a piece of chicken out of the pan before putting it in his mouth. He made a noise of appreciation before getting a plate from the cabinet and putting some food on it then joining me at the table.

We didn't talk at first. I never had much to say to Graham anyway, but I felt especially weird around him after talking about him with Janet today.

"This is good," Graham said after a few moments. "When did you learn to cook?"

"I started cooking for myself in college," I replied, taking the last bite of my food. "And then I cooked for Brendan and me every night."

I cursed at myself for forgetting to get some of my kitchen items from the apartment like my crock pot and air fryer. Brendan didn't know how to use them, so he would probably just end up throwing them away. And Adam and Graham didn't have those things in the house.

"I can clean up if you want," Graham offered as I brought my plate over to the sink.

"No, it's fine, I got it." Part of me wasn't sure I believed he or Adam knew how to wash a dish.

Graham just did his signature shrug and left the kitchen after placing his plate in the sink.

**

Thanks for reading!

Please let me know what you think so far!

04

Rowan Warner

I made it through the rest of the week living at Adam's house with minimal contact with him. Graham spoke to me more than he did, but even that was very little.

On Saturday, I sat in my room and pulled out a few more of my candles and sat in bed with my laptop, looking for nearby apartments I could get by myself. Everything in the area was either too pricey or too run down. I wanted to live in a place that I actually liked, not some place with stains all over the walls and an outdated interior.

After a while of searching, there was a knock on my door. A moment later, Mom walked into the room with a wide grin.

"Hi, baby," she said, coming over to sit on the bed. "I just wanted to stop by and see how it was going here."

"Everything's fine, Mom," I assured her.

"I just wanted to see how you were adjusting."

"I'm already adjusted," I said, and it wasn't a lie. This living situation was already better than my old one, despite not getting along with Adam.

"Did you think about calling the police about Brendan?" she asked.

I sighed and shut my laptop, glancing over at her. The police had gotten involved with Brendan and I once and nothing came of it. They just saw it as us getting into a fight and nothing more. There were no arrests or questioning or anything. It was just dropped.

"I've talked to the police before. They didn't do anything."

Mom let out a deep breath and ran her hand over my comforter.

"He hasn't tried to see you has he?"

I shook my head. "He doesn't even know where I am."

I didn't dare tell her that I wanted to go back to the apartment and get my kitchen items. The more I thought about it, the more I realized I wasn't willing to part with those things and I needed to go get them. I hadn't decided yet how I would do it, if I would call Brendan and tell him I was coming, or if I would try to go when he wasn't around. I didn't know what would be worse.

"I also wanted to tell you we're having a birthday party for Evie next weekend," she said, referencing one of my nieces. "You'll come right?"

"Yeah, I'll be there." Now that I was away from Brendan, there was no need for me to avoid seeing my family.

"I'm really happy you're living here," Mom said with a fond smile. "I think it's about time you and Adam had some bonding experience."

I couldn't break it to her that me living here seemed to make our relationship even more strained than it already was, especially not if she was imagining the two of us somehow becoming closer from living together even though we lived together our whole lives.

"Anyway," she started, standing up from the bed. "I have to get going. I was just stopping by to see you. Please call me more and come over whenever you want."

I stood up from the bed and walked over to the other side to give her a hug.

"Okay, Mom," I said with a chuckle.

"Tell Adam and Graham to come over too."

"I will."

I walked Mom downstairs and saw Graham sitting in front of the TV, his feet resting up on the coffee table.

"There's my other baby," Mom said walking over to Graham and placing a kiss on the top of his head.

"Hi, Gem," he said, grinning up at her.

"I gotta run," she said, heading toward the door. "I'll see you soon!"

Once she was out of the house, I turned to Graham.

"I'm heading out too," I told him, making my way to the hall closet to get my shoes.

"Where are you going?"

"Why do you ask?"

Graham did his famous shrug. "I'm bored and maybe you'll give me an idea on what to do."

"I'm not doing anything fun," I replied, slipping my shoes on. "I'm going back to the apartment to pick up the last of my things."

Graham sat up, his feet planted on the floor. "By yourself?"

"That was the plan."

He stood up from the couch without saying anything and pulled his keys from his pocket. Graham made his way over toward where I was standing and put his own shoes on.

"I'll take you," he said. "Let's go."

He gestured toward the door and started to move toward it. I grabbed him by the shoulder to halt him.

"You don't need to come with me," I assured him. "It's just a couple things. I can handle it."

"I'm sure you can," he said, glancing at my hand on his shoulder. I quickly removed it. "But if you think anyone in your family would forgive me if I let you walk into your abusive ex boyfriend's apartment all by yourself, you're wrong."

"No one would have to know."

"I can't lie to Adam," he replied. "Or your mother for that matter."

"Adam wouldn't care."

"Yes, he would," Graham instantly responded. "I'm not fighting with you about this. Let's go."

And that was how I ended up in the passenger's seat of Graham's old pickup truck. This thing was more like a death trap than a vehicle. Every bump in the road, the whole truck shook.

"Why don't you get rid of this old thing?" I asked him, holding onto the handle above my seat.

He had this truck since he first learned how to drive. He saved up enough money and bought himself his own truck, and then learned how to fix cars with my Dad by fixing this one up. It was still a hunk of shit.

"Because I love it," he said with a grin, patting his hand on the dash.

"It sounds like it's falling apart."

"It's not."

Just as he said that, Graham hit a pothole and the whole truck shook. He wasn't fazed by it the way I was.

When we finally got to the apartment, I made Graham circle around so I could see if Brendan's car was here. Luckily, I didn't see it, and when we

got up to the apartment, it was empty.

"I just need to get my kitchen things," I said, heading toward the kitchen. Thankfully, Brendan hadn't gotten rid of my crock pot or air fryer and they were both still sitting on the counter where I left them.

I turned around, holding my crock pot to hand off to Graham, but he was gone. I sighed and placed the item back on the counter before leaving the kitchen to look for him. When I found Graham, he was standing in my old bedroom, glancing around at the walls.

"Need anything in here?" he asked me, turning to face me when he heard me approach.

"No, just the things in the kitchen."

I looked at my empty bookshelf and suddenly wished I could take it back to Adam's with me. If I asked Graham, I was sure he would help me lug it downstairs, but I didn't want to be that much of a bother. I wasn't even sure we would be able to get it out of the bedroom doorway with such a tight squeeze in the hallway since I had built the shelf in the room.

"Is that yours?" Graham asked when he noticed me looking at the shelf.

"I don't need it," I said before repeating, "Just the things in the kitchen."

Graham nodded and followed me back to the kitchen. He took the crock pot while I took the air fryer. I gave one last long look at the apartment before dropping the key onto the counter and walking out. That way, I would never go back there.

Graham didn't say anything as we went back down to his truck, shoving my crock pot and air fryer inside. Instead of getting in the truck, Graham stood on the passenger's side and looked back at the apartment building.

"You want to go back in for the shelf?" he asked. "It'll fit in the bed. I can tie it down."

"No, I don't need it," I said, sliding into the passenger's seat.

Graham put one hand on the passenger door and the other on the top of the door opening, slightly leaning into where I was sitting. I had to look away so I wouldn't think about how hot he looked doing that. Part of me didn't trust myself not to reach out and touch him. Or worse, lean in and kiss him in my vulnerable state.

"But you want it," Graham said in a low tone.

I let my eyes travel over to him. He was staring at me intensely, his arms and chest looking sculpted through his tight fitting t-shirt. I had never let myself pay that much attention to Graham. He was always Adam's friend and I knew not to go there. But seeing him like this, seeing him look at me with such an intense stare, being so close to me and acting like he cared about me, I couldn't help but feel attracted to him. And that was bad. Very bad.

"No, drop it," I snapped without meaning to. Graham didn't let my tone faze him and stayed in the same position. "I can't go back in there anyway. I left the key."

That made Graham back up. He released his hold on the truck and backed away from the doorway. Without saying anything, he closed my door and rounded the truck to get into the driver's seat.

And as he drove back toward the house, I now felt awkward and weird about snapping at him. Him not saying anything made me think he was feeling the same.

"Thank you for bringing me and helping me out," I said sincerely. "That was really nice of you."

He shrugged. I was beginning to think that was his default answer to anything.

"It got me out of the house."

That was all of our conversation on the drive back. When we reached the house, Graham parked the truck in its usual spot and grabbed the crock pot

from behind the seat before heading into the house. I followed him with the air fryer in my hands as he unlocked the house.

"Where do you want this?" he asked, turning to face me as we kicked off our shoes.

"The kitchen," I said and then added, "If that's okay."

"Yeah, I don't care," he said, moving toward the kitchen.

We placed the items on the counter near the coffee maker and beside the stove.

"Hey, uh, we're having some of the guys over tonight," Graham said, leaning back against the counter. "I assume Adam didn't tell you and I wanted to give you a heads up."

"Yeah, he didn't tell me," I answered. "Thanks."

Graham nodded. "You're welcome to come hang out with us. Dean's coming."

Of course Dean was coming. Adam actually liked him and chose to spend time with him.

"Thanks, but I don't think Adam would be too happy about that."

"Who cares?" Graham asked and then walked out of the kitchen.

I spent the rest of the day unpacking more of my things. I placed all my books in neat piles on the floor in the corner of my room. Part of me wanted to keep them packed away because I knew I wouldn't be staying here for long, but I liked having them out. It was a comfort seeing them, like that feeling of calmness when you walk into a bookstore or a library. Even though I didn't really have any place to put them, I wanted to see them.

When I was finished organizing my books, I went on to start cleaning the house. Graham and Adam were by no means messy pigs, but they didn't keep things as clean as I liked to keep them, and if we were having

company tonight, I wanted the place to look presentable even if they weren't my company.

I started with the bathrooms. The one upstairs was worse than the half bath downstairs, so I started with that one. I plucked the toothbrush that was just sitting there off the sink and put it in the toothbrush holder in the cabinet above the sink. Then I emptied the trash and looked through the cabinet under the sink for cleaners. I scrubbed everything and when I was satisfied, I moved onto the bathroom downstairs.

Once the bathrooms were clean, I went to the living room where they would most likely be having their company. I was surprised Graham wasn't in there, but when I looked out the window, I saw that he was outside with Adam, the two of them hunched over the open hood of Adam's car.

As I was vacuuming the living room, I let my eyes wander out the window to Graham and Adam. Graham was wearing nothing but his loose fitting jeans, black converse sneakers, and a thin white tank top, his shirt thrown over the hood of his truck. I must have vacuumed the same spot for ten minutes just to watch the way the muscles in his back moved as he leaned over the hood of Adam's car, his curly brown hair falling in his face even as he tried to push it back.

I needed to *stop* . Looking at Graham like that was not acceptable. Just looking wasn't even an option. I tore my eyes away from the window and continued cleaning the living room.

Graham and Adam walked into the house just as I was placing a throw blanket over the back of the couch. They both stopped short and took in the room, Graham taking off his shoes at the hall closet. Adam didn't even bother taking off his shoes as he walked all over the newly clean carpet.

"I just cleaned that," I told him with a glare, gesturing toward his shoes. He rolled his eyes and stepped off the carpet and onto the hardwood of the hall between the living room and kitchen.

"It's spotless in here," Graham commented.

"Why is there a blanket on the couch?" Adam asked, gesturing toward the couch with his hand.

"It's a throw blanket," I replied. "That's what it's for."

Adam walked over to the coffee table and blew out the candle I had lit.

"We're having the guys over. I'm not going to let it smell like flowers in here," he said before going toward the stairs.

"It's pine," Graham said, causing Adam to turn around, one of his feet on the first step.

"What?" he asked.

"It's pine, not flowers," Graham told him.

Adam gave him a strange look before retreating up the stairs.

I scoffed and took the lighter out of the side table I placed it in, then relit the candle.

"I like the pine," Graham told me. "It smells like Christmas."

I nodded. "It's probably the manliest scent I have."

"How many candles do you have?"

"I don't know, like maybe nine or ten," I guessed.

Graham sat down on the couch. "Do you collect them or something?"

"I just like having them," I said. "I like having different scents for different occasions. I feel like a scent can really set the mood or the tone. It can make a place feel familiar, like home."

"I guess I never thought of it like that," Graham responded, nodding in agreement. "Your house growing up, around Christmas time, always

smelled like that sugar cookie candle. I loved it. It always made the holidays feel like they were supposed to, you know?"

I nodded.

Graham didn't have the easiest childhood with his parents always fighting and his dad eventually walking out. He spent a lot of his time at our house because his mom worked, and part of me thought she in some way resented her son for her marriage ending. I knew the two didn't have much of a relationship now since she moved away as soon as Graham was old enough to live on his own. I could only imagine how lonely and depressing his Christmases were growing up. It was no wonder why his fondest memories of that time were at our house.

"I have that one," I said. "It's one of my favorites for Christmas time. That and this holly berry one I have."

Before Graham or I could say anything else, Adam came stomping down the stairs with a scowl on his face.

"Rowan, where is my toothbrush?" he asked.

I crossed my arms over my chest. "It's in the toothbrush holder where it should be. You shouldn't just leave it on the sink like that. It's unsanitary."

"Don't touch my shit." And with that, he stomped back up the stairs.

I let out a long sigh and looked back at Graham.

"He used to bribe me to keep our room clean because our mother wouldn't let us out of it if it wasn't, now he decides he doesn't want me cleaning up after him," I complained, sitting down on the couch, the middle seat between Graham and me.

"He bribed you?" Graham raised his eyebrows.

I chuckled, leaning back on the couch. "Yeah. He was the first person to know I was gay. I didn't tell him, he just figured it out. And he would bribe me with letting me hang out with him and his friends I thought were cute.

Or he would get Camilla to buy him nail polish by telling her he was giving it to a girl he liked, but he was really giving it to me because I liked to paint my nails."

"Was it a bribe whenever you hung out with the two of us?" Graham asked me with a playful smile.

"No, it wasn't," I instantly replied. And it was the truth. Adam never would have never allowed Graham to be part of one of his bribes. "I didn't *hang out* with you two. You tricked me into going along with you so you could mess with me."

Graham contemplated for a moment. "I guess we did mess with you a lot."

"You think?" I asked in a playful tone.

"It was all in good fun," Graham replied with a small grin. "You were especially easy to mess with."

"Apparently so."

Graham and I stared at each other for a moment. My eyes were glued to him and it was concerning me. I had never looked at him like this. He had always just been Adam's friend, basically an extension to our family. And now because I was feeling lonely and sad I started noticing that Graham was actually incredibly attractive?

This couldn't be happening to me.

"I'm just gonna..." I trailed, gesturing toward the stares.

Graham quirked his head to the side and then nodded.

I ran up the stairs without looking back.

**

Thanks for reading!

Please let me know what you think!

05

Rowan Warner

I got a text from Dean after Adam and Graham's guests started showing up. I had been hiding in my room since after my conversation with Graham before anyone had gotten here and planned on staying up here the whole night.

From: Dean
R u home????

To: Dean
yes

From: Dean
Come downstairs then!!!

To: Dean
no

Dean didn't respond, but a few moments later, he was barging into my bedroom while I sat in bed reading a book.

"Come on," he urged, leaning against the door frame. "I told the guys not to ask about your face. Or why you're living here."

I rolled my eyes. "Because that's not going to make them even more curious," I sarcastically replied.

"It's better than having them say something stupid."

"With my plan, they wouldn't even see me and wouldn't have a chance to say something stupid," I argued, closing the book and placing it on my nightstand.

"And what was your plan?" Dean asked. "Hiding up here all night?"

"Pretty much."

"That's lame!" he exclaimed. "Come downstairs. We have food and beer. I even brought those hard ciders you like."

"Who's here?" I asked.

"Just Tim from the shop, their old roommate John, and Aaron," Dean listed them off. Tim worked for my dad and he was around Dean's age. He and Adam were fast friends when he started working there.

"I really don't want to go socialize," I told him.

"At least come down and have something to eat," he said. "I want to hang with you. Before we go down there though, I want to talk to you about something."

"What?"

Dean walked into the room and shut the door behind him. I held back my cringe as he sat on my bed. I hated when people got into my bed with their day clothes on. The only person that it didn't bother me with was my mother.

"So, I'm bringing my girlfriend to Evie's birthday next weekend," Dean started. He had this secret girlfriend that none of us met and our parents didn't even know about yet. They had been together for a while, but he rarely brought her up, and had never brought her to meet the family.

"We finally get to meet her?" I asked.

Dean nodded. "Yeah. I was sorta wondering if you could maybe come out with us one night this week before the weekend so you can meet her. I just want her to have a familiar face she can go talk to in case I'm pulled away or something. So she doesn't feel super awkward."

"Yeah, I'll do that," I told him. "So you two are serious then?"

"Yeah," he replied. "The plan was to bring her to the cookout, but she had to go to some bridal shower. Mom doesn't know she's coming yet."

"You know she'll be excited."

He laughed. "Probably too excited. That's why I want you to meet her first. So if for some reason I'm not there, you can save her from the awkwardness."

"I can do that."

"I was going to have Adam meet her too, but he's not necessarily a friendly face," Dean continued. "He's not good with people like you are."

"I'm not good with people, I'm just not an asshole like him."

Dean chuckled again. "True."

He stood up from the bed and motioned for me to follow him. I let out a groan but obliged anyway.

I did want to spend some time with Dean. He was always everyone's favorite sibling, but especially mine. He was the nice brother, the only one who never messed with me or anyone, and after having to deal with Adam, he was much appreciated.

"Adam should be at least a little buzzed by now," Dean told me as we entered the hallway, me shutting the bedroom door behind us. "So he shouldn't be *that* much of an asshole."

That was one good thing about Adam; he was a happy drunk.

The first time he got drunk in high school and I had to take care of him so Mom and Dad wouldn't find out was also the first time he was actually nice to me. Dean and I had to go pick up Adam and Graham from some party and the two of us each took care of one of them in their drunken states. I nearly passed out at how happy Adam was and part of me wished he was like that all the time. Graham was sort of the same way.

They, at least, were much better drunks than Brendan. And I would choose to deal with them a hundred times before dealing with him.

When Dean and I got downstairs, Adam, Graham, John, and Aaron were playing some video game on the TV while Tim sipped on a beer and watched. Tim looked like he was already drunk and they had barely been here an hour.

"I drove Tim here," Dean whispered to me. "And Aaron drove John."

I nodded. At least I wouldn't have to worry about any of them getting home or finding a place for them to sleep here.

"Dean, you found Rowan!" Tim exclaimed happily, holding his beer bottle up as if toasting to me.

"Yeah, I did," Dean said, making his way over to one of the kitchen chairs they must have dragged in here. I followed him and took the seat next to him. Adam turned to glance at us before quickly looking back at the game.

"You're going to start hanging out with us now?" Tim asked, leaning over the arm of the couch.

"I guess," I said, looking to Dean who just laughed and stood up from the chair.

"I'll get you a cider," he said. He quickly went to the kitchen then came back with a can for me in his hand.

The guys switched off with the controllers and talked about a bunch of stuff I didn't care about. This was why it was hard to hang out with straight guys. At least they weren't spending the whole time saying vulgar things about women.

"Rowan," Tim whispered, though it was much louder than he intended. "Do you want to come sit over here?" His words were slurred and his eyes were glossy. I had been sitting down there longer than I had realized and Tim had

only gotten more drunk over time. I was still sipping on the first cider Dean had given me.

"Um, there's no room for me over there," I told him. He was sitting on the couch next to Adam with Graham on the other side. The rest of us sat on kitchen chairs. I really needed to convince Adam and Graham that they needed more furniture in here if they wanted to have guests over.

"Sure there is," Tim replied. "I can squeeze." He moved closer to Adam, but Adam didn't seem to notice. He was too engrossed with the game on the TV to care.

"I'm okay over here," I said. "Thanks though, Tim."

"Is Tim trying to pick you up right now?" Dean asked with a playful grin, leaning over to speak to me quietly.

I shoved him lightly. "No, he's not."

"Seems like it," Dean said, taking a sip of water. "You know he considers himself, like, a quarter bisexual?"

"How can you be a quarter bisexual?" I asked. "I feel like that's one of those things you either are or you aren't."

Dean shrugged. "Don't ask me. That's just what he says. He apparently hooked up with a couple guys in college for the half a semester he was there. He says he would have sex with guys but not date them I guess."

"Are you talking about me?" Tim called out, loud enough that everyone turned to look at him. Graham looked between the two of us strangely before glancing back at the TV.

"I was just telling Rowan about your bisexual tendencies," Dean told him with a laugh.

"Oh, yeah, I would fuck Rowan," Tim replied, earning a punch in the shoulder from Adam.

"Tim!" Adam angrily exclaimed. "Knock it off!"

Graham eyed Tim suspiciously while I glared over at Dean who was now dying of laughter.

Tim held his hands out as if to protect himself from Adam.

"Chill, Adam," he said. "I'm just saying."

"Well, don't."

Tim turned back to me with wide eyes and I almost laughed at how innocent he was making himself look.

"I'm not trying to be creepy," Tim slurred. "I just think you're attractive."

Graham groaned, shaking his head at Tim.

Dean continued his fit of laugher. "He must be in a dry spell," he said, nudging my shoulder.

I sent Tim a tight lipped smile. "Thanks, Tim. That's very nice of you."

"Tim, I thought I told you to shut the fuck up," Adam snapped. Tim motioned like he was locking his lips up and turned back to the TV.

Adam must not have been as close to drunk as Dean had thought he was because he wasn't being his usual drunk happy self, not with all the snapping he was doing at Tim. But surprisingly, Adam didn't start getting mad at me when I started cleaning up the beer bottles and used plates.

I was cleaning a dish in the sink when I heard someone enter the kitchen. I turned to see Tim bringing in an empty beer bottle.

"Thanks, Tim," I said, taking the bottle from him.

"I'm done for the night," he slurred. "That was my last one."

"Good. I don't think you need any more."

He chuckled and leaned against the counter right next to me, close enough so that we were touching. I tried not to think too much about it. He was obviously just drunk and didn't know what he was doing. But, of course, he had to start talking.

"I wasn't messin' with you in there," Tim said. "I do think you're hot. I'm really only into guys sometimes."

"Just when you're drunk?"

Tim laughed. "Kinda."

He got closer to me even as I tried to put some space between us. Tim reached for me, putting one hand on my waist and the other hooked around my neck. I was practically holding him up in his drunken state.

"Are you okay, Tim?" I asked, placing down the plate I was cleaning.

"I'm feeling *a little* dizzy," he said with a chuckle.

He brought his face closer to mine and I turned so our lips wouldn't touch. His grip on me was tight, and I was worried he would fall if I forced him off of me. Tim brought his face against my neck and let out another laugh.

"The room is spinning," he said, his voice high pitched.

"Tim," Graham called out, causing both of us to look at him as he stood in the kitchen doorway. "What're you doin'?" His voice was slurring, but he clearly wasn't as drunk as his friend.

"Rowan's juss helpin' me out," he told him.

"Are you kissin' him?" Graham asked, looking troubled.

Tim laughed again. "No!"

"Don't kiss him," Graham said, walking over to us.

"Graham," I said, struggling to hold Tim up. "A little help please."

Luckily, Graham was sober enough that he was able to help me. He pried Tim off of me and gently placed him down so that he was sitting on the floor.

"He really wasn't kissin' you?" Graham asked, his eyebrows raised in question. He looked almost concerned, like he would defend my honor if I had told him Tim was bothering me.

"No," I answered quietly. "He wasn't."

"Good." His face was serious, eyebrows knitted together as he stared down at me.

A moment later, Dean walked in and stopped short when he saw Tim sitting on the floor. He sighed, setting some empty beer bottles down on the counter and stopped in front of Tim.

"I guess it's time to take him home," Dean said, leaning down to pick Tim up from the floor. He had one arm around him while Tim held on for dear life.

"Make sure he's okay before you leave him," I said as Dean started making his way out of the kitchen.

"Will do," Dean replied. "I'll see you guys later. Rowan, I'll text you about what we talked about earlier."

"Got it."

With that, Dean left the room and said his goodbyes to the others. Graham and I stood in the kitchen while I rinsed out the empty bottles. When I finished, I turned to him to see that he was already looking at me.

"I'm going to head up to bed," I told him. I didn't want to think about how good he looked with his glossy eyes and his hair pushed back on his head as he leaned against the kitchen wall. I had to look away.

Why was I still thinking about Graham like this when I just had a guy hanging all over me? My desperation in my loneliness seemed to be only

reserved for him. I wished someone else could occupy my thoughts.

"Goodnight," he said before turning away from me and going back into the living room.

I spent some time in bed reading to escape reality, and all thoughts of Graham, before finally turning the lights out and going to sleep.

It wasn't until the next morning that I realized something was off about my sleeping situation. I had my blanket wrapped around me like I always did, but when I rolled over, my head hit a bare chest.

At first, I didn't think anything of it, being used to sleeping in the same bed as Brendan. But I quickly realized my situation. I didn't live with Brendan anymore and the only other people that lived in this house were my brother and his best friend.

I slowly opened my eyes and saw the chest I was laying on belonged to Graham. He didn't even wake up when I had rolled onto him.

I sat up and shook him with a hand on his bare shoulder.

"Graham," I whispered, shaking his shoulder
again. "Graham, wake up."

He hummed in his sleep, stirring slightly but not opening his eyes.

"Graham," I said again with a particularly hard shove and his eyes sprung open, widening when he saw me.

Graham quickly sat up and looked around the room, presumably realizing it wasn't his.

"What am I doing in here?" he asked, his voice raspy and full of sleep. I tried my hardest not to swoon.

"That's what I'm wondering."

"I was so drunk last night. I must've thought this was my room," he said, rubbing his forehead with his palm.

"Sounds about right."

It took everything in me not to stare at his well sculpted chest that was displayed right in front of me. Part of me wanted to look, to savor it, knowing this would be one of the only times I'd get to see it this close, but I didn't want Graham knowing the effect he had on me.

"I didn't..." Graham paused, his look of confusion mixing with one of guilt. "I didn't touch you or anything, right?"

That caused me to bring my eyes to his.

"No," I replied. "You didn't do anything. I didn't even know you were here until just now."

"Okay, I, uh, I should get out of here," he said, doing anything to keep his eyes away from me. "Before Adam sees and we have to explain this to him."

"Yeah, you probably should."

Graham stood up from the bed, muttering "sorry," before quickly leaving the room. Once he was gone and the door was shut, I sprung up from the bed and started pacing my room.

That had no business being that awkward. Graham and I could barely look at each other and we hadn't even *done* anything.

My pacing eventually brought me to the other side of the bed where I saw Graham's crumpled shirt on the floor. I picked it up and examined it. It still smelled like his cologne even without bringing it anywhere near my face. There was no way I could go give this to him. Not with how awkward it had been. Not with the possibility of Adam seeing and wondering why I had one of Graham's shirts in my room in the first place.

So I just tucked it away in my closet and decided I would deal with it later.

**

Thanks for reading!! Please leave your thoughts!!

06

Rowan Warner

"He got into bed with you?" Janet excitedly asked as she stood in the doorway of my office Monday morning.

"Sh!" I said, motioning for her to come in and shut the door. It wouldn't do much, since everyone could see inside the offices, but it would give some semblance of privacy.

Janet sat down at one of the chairs in front of my desk, leaning forward and keeping her voice down as she spoke again.

"Nobody just gets into bed with someone," she said. "In his drunken mind, he *wanted* to be in bed with you."

"He just thought my room was his," I argued. "He wasn't thinking clearly."

She shook her head with a wide smile. "That's just the excuse he gave you. Drunk him knew that he was going into your room."

"Why do you think that?"

"You said Adam's room is closer to Graham's than yours, right?"Janet asked. I nodded in confirmation. "So why didn't he end up in Adam's room if he was just confused? His drunken mind knew that he wanted to make a move on you so he went up to your room, saw that you were asleep, and just got into bed and went to sleep because he wanted to be near you."

"There's no way that's true," I argued, raising my eyebrows at her. "He was all weird about it after and he hasn't looked at me or spoken to me since it happened."

The incident with Graham only happened two days ago, but it was obvious he was avoiding me. If we saw each other in the house, he would leave the

room. He didn't look at me. He didn't talk to me. The whole thing was obviously a huge issue for him.

"Because he's embarrassed!" Janet exclaimed. "He either truly realized his attraction to you while he was drunk and now he feels weird about it or he thinks he blew it with you."

"Janet, you're just making things up to make this seem more interesting than it is. I don't know why I even told you."

"You told me because it made you feel things," she said with a wicked grin. "And it's bothering you that he's avoiding you."

I would never admit to her that she was right. It *did* bother me that he was avoiding me, but I chalked that up to the awkward tension in the house because of it. Waking up next to Graham was a weird experience, but I didn't feel the need to avoid him over it. It was a drunken mistake that he ended up in my room, and a pretty tame one at that. I just didn't understand why it had bothered him so much.

Maybe it was because he was completely grossed out by it. Maybe that was why I was so bothered by the fact that he was avoiding me. It was possible Graham was just grossed out that he got into my bed, whether it be because I was gay or because he didn't like me or because I was Adam's brother. Or it could have been a mixture of all those things. And that bothered me.

"It's bothering me because instead of just being adults about this and getting over it, he's choosing to make my living situation even harder by being super awkward," I told Janet, logging into my computer. "I mean it's bad enough there's tension with me and Adam. Now there has to be tension with me and Graham too?"

"Or it's bothering you because you like him and now he's not talking to you," Janet countered.

I scoffed. "I don't like Graham. Trust me. I've known him my whole life."

"And that's why you're denying it," she said. "Because he's Adam's best friend and you've known him your whole life. You don't want to like him, but you do."

I shot her a look of irritation. "Don't you have work to be doing, *boss* ?"

Janet glared at me and stood up from the chair. "Don't *boss* me. This was very important business we were taking care of. I'll pencil you in for another meeting so we can continue this conversation."

"Please don't."

"Does lunch work?"

Janet didn't even wait for my response as she left me office and walked into hers. She smirked at me through the glass windows as she sat down at her desk. I looked away from her and a moment later, I got a notification from my calendar that Janet had scheduled a meeting for us at lunch. I rolled my eyes and dismissed the notification.

Part of me knew that there was some truth to what Janet was saying about me at least. I had an undoubtable attraction to Graham and *maybe* I was liking the fact that he had been so nice to me since I had moved in with him and Adam. That didn't mean I *liked* him, but who wouldn't start having little feelings for an attractive guy that was being nice to them? Especially after the relationship I was in, I'd take any attractive guy being nice to me.

Around lunch time, Janet walked back into my office and shut the door.

"I've thought about it and you know what you need?" she asked, sitting down in the chair she occupied earlier.

"What?"

"You need a rebound after Brendan," she said. I was about to object, but she held her hand up to silence me. "Hear me out. You may have some feelings for Graham, but it may not be because you actually like him, but you're looking for some affection after ending things with Brendan."

"Okay..."

"So you need to get on a dating app, find a hot guy, go on a date, and see what happens," she continued. "I mean, you were with Brendan for years, so you never really had the chance to date around. Maybe these feelings for Graham are because he's just there."

"I never said I had feelings for Graham."

She set a stern look on me. "Don't bullshit me."

"I just don't think I need to date right now," I said with a sigh. "I just got out of a relationship. I think being single for a while could be good for me."

"I'm not saying get a boyfriend. I'm saying find a hot guy to hook up with."

"Maybe."

"Do it!" she exclaimed. "Then tell me all about it."

"That might be a bit TMI for an employee and their boss."

She waved me off. "You know we don't have an 'employee-boss' relationship."

"I'll consider it," I told her. She clapped her hands.

"Yay!" she said before standing up. "I don't want to take up your whole lunch and I want to go get coffee. Want one?"

"Sure."

"Be back in a bit!"

When the work day ended, I only had a few minutes to go home and change before I met Dean and his girlfriend for dinner. Luckily, Adam and Graham weren't home yet, so I didn't have to endure any awkwardness in the house while I was there.

By the time I got to the restaurant, Dean and his girlfriend were already seated. I scurried over to the table and sat down across from Dean.

"Sorry, am I late?" I asked, picking up the menu.

"No, we got here early," Dean replied. "Nora, this is my brother, Rowan. Rowan, this is my girlfriend, Nora." Dean gestured toward the woman sitting beside him. She was pretty with a friendly face, her brown hair cut short and framing her face nicely.

"Hi," I said with a smile. "It's good to meet you."

"You too!" Nora excitedly replied. "Dean has talked so much about you."

I glanced at my brother. "He has?"

"Good things," Dean told me. "There's a reason why it's you here with us and none of the others."

"He says you're the nicest," Nora added. "And friendliest."

"I guess that's true," I said. I was definitely nicer than Adam and easier to get along with than Charlie, Camilla, and Cade.

"I appreciate you coming out with us, Rowan," Nora said, sharing a look with Dean. "I guess I'm a little nervous to be meeting your family and it'll be nice to already know someone other than Dean."

"It's no problem," I told her. "And you don't need to be nervous. Our family is big, but most of them are welcoming. Mom will be really excited to meet you."

The waitress brought over our drinks. Dean had ordered me a soda while they waited for me. Then, she took our food orders and went on her way.

"She's worried about remembering everybody, but I know she's knows everyone's names," Dean continued our previous conversation.

"You don't need to remember everyone," I assured her, taking a sip of my soda. "No one will care if you're mixing up names. We know there's a lot to remember."

"I think I have mostly everybody memorized," Nora replied. "Charlie and Camilla are twins and they're thirty. Charlie is married to Ally and they have two kids, Evie and Max. Camilla is married to Jared and they have two kids, Jeremy and Julia."

I nodded. "You're even getting some ages."

Nora laughed. "I know Evie is turning five."

"She's the oldest of the nieces and nephews," Dean told her. "Then it's Jeremy, he's four, then Max and Julia are both two, but Max is a few months older."

"I know the next oldest sibling is Dean," she said, gesturing to her boyfriend. "Then Adam, then it's you and you're... twenty-two?"

"Yeah, I am," I said.

"He'll be twenty-three next month," Dean added. "Gotta think of a birthday celebration for you."

I rolled my eyes. "I don't need one."

"But you're getting one," he said before turning to Nora. "The last one is Cade. He's seventeen."

"I knew that," she responded. "I swear I did. And there's a bonus, pseudo-sibling. Graham? He's Adam's age, so... twenty-four?"

"He's a few months older than Adam, so he's already twenty-five," Dean corrected her with a grin. "But I told you that you knew everyone. You don't need to worry about the extended family."

"I wasn't finished!" Nora told him. "Your parents are Chuck and Gemma. Chuck owns the shop you work at."

Dean chuckled. "Yes, very good."

"Nobody else has any significant others I should know about so I don't look stupid?" Nora asked, looking between the both of us.

"Not that I know of," I said, taking another sip of water. "I know for a fact Adam and Graham don't have anyone, not that they'd bring anyone around even if they did."

"Cade might, but don't worry about it," Dean added. "He has a new girlfriend every month. I'm surprised that kid hasn't gone through his whole graduating class yet."

A few moments later, the waitress was back with our food and the three of us made small talk while we ate. Eventually, Dean got up to go to the bathroom, leaving Nora and I alone.

"I really do appreciate you coming out with us, Rowan," Nora said, placing her fork down on her plate.

I shrugged. "I'm glad I did. I haven't been getting out much lately."

She nodded. "Do you mind if I ask a couple questions while Dean's gone? You don't have to answer if you don't want to."

I was nervous for where this was going, but I nodded anyway. The night had been going along nicely and now I was worried something she would say would ruin it.

"Has Dean ever brought a girlfriend home before?" she sheepishly asked. She looked down at her plate just after the words left her mouth. I was relieved that this was her question and not something crazy.

"He did when he was in high school," I answered. "But nobody he was seeing as an adult."

She looked up at me. "Oh, okay. I was just wondering because he seems sort of nervous about it, even though he tries to act like he's not, and that

makes *me* nervous. So I didn't know if something had happened or if this would be the first time he's introducing someone to the family."

"It's the first time that it matters," I said. "The others he brought home only because he lived there."

She shot me a small smile.

"Is there anything else I should know about your family that Dean might not have told me?"

I thought about it for a moment before answering.

"Adam can be a bit of an asshole, but he won't be mean to you or anything. He might just ignore you. That's just how he is. Don't take it personally," I started. "Dad's kinda just like that, but he'll at least acknowledge you. It's not that he doesn't like you. Dad is just not good around people, especially new people."

She nodded, urging me to go on.

"Mom's a sweetheart, but she can be a bit over the top," I continued. "Don't let her scare you off. She's just easily excited, and if Dean has already told her you're coming, she's not going to stop thinking about it all week."

"She seems sweet from what Dean has told me," Nora agreed.

"She is. She'll love you."

Dean came back to the table and we finished our meals, Dean paying for everyone. We said our goodbyes and I headed back to the house. When I got there, Adam and Graham's cars were in their usual spots and I could see the light from the TV in the living room window.

When I got into the house, Adam and Graham were sitting together on the couch. Adam glanced over at me when he saw me come in, but Graham kept his eyes fixed on the TV. I swore I saw his jaw clench.

"How was Dean's girlfriend?" Adam asked in a bored tone.

"She's nice, so you better be nice to her at Evie's party," I told him in a stern voice.

"Okay," he said, sounding uninterested. He looked back at the TV, seemingly telling me that our conversation was over.

That was like most of our conversations lately, just small exchanges and Adam making it known he was done speaking with me by ignoring my presence. And now with Graham also ignoring my existence, I felt even more isolated in this house.

I couldn't get out of here fast enough. I got ready for bed and then took my laptop and sat on top of the comforter, looking online for apartments. This was something I was doing every day lately. I didn't know how much longer I could stand living with Adam, knowing I truly wasn't wanted here.

As I looked through for apartments, it became clear to me that if I wanted to get out of here, I either needed to find a place that needed roommates or settle for something I really didn't want. Neither option was ideal, but the sooner I got away from Adam and Graham and could finally live in a place in peace, the better. So I applied to some apartments I really didn't want then closed my laptop for the night.

Even living in a place I didn't love, I could still make it a home. It felt like I'd never really had a place that felt like home, a place I could go and be comfortable and feel at peace. My whole childhood, I lived with Adam who hated me. Then, I moved out for college and lived with horrible roommates my first two years until I finally moved in with Brendan for my last two and beyond. And there was never a moment of peace with him. Now I was here and living with two people who didn't like me and wanted me gone.

Hopefully soon, I would have a place to call my own.

**

Thanks for reading !! leave your thoughts

07

Rowan Warner

The entire backyard was filled with dinosaur decorations. That was what Evie had requested when my mother asked her what the theme for her birthday party should be. So there were dinosaurs everywhere.

I had gotten here early with the intention of helping Mom set everything up, but I clearly didn't get here early enough. She had the whole yard decorated, the paper plates and utensils out, and the food ready to go in the kitchen. Evie was going to be so excited when she got here.

"How does it look?" Mom asked, holding her arms out as if presenting the backyard to me. "Do you think we need anything else?"

"I think it looks perfect and Evie's going to be so happy."

"Your father might need help setting up the bounce house," Mom said, gesturing to where Dad was in the backyard with t the deflated house.

Even knowing he would decline my help, I went over there anyway and he was swearing up a storm as he struggled connecting the air-blowing machine to the bounce house.

"Need any help?" I asked him. He looked up at me from his spot on the ground with his classic angry expression.

"This fuckin' thing is so stupid," he complained. "Next time I'm just hiring someone to do this for me."

"I can help you," I offered. He just glared at me.

"I don't need help."

I stayed with him while he continued to struggle with the machine. He eventually got everything connected and started blowing air into the house. At that point, he enlisted me for help to anchor the house to the ground. As we finished up with that, a squeal grabbed our attention and Evie came running over in excitement.

"I can't wait to go in!" she exclaimed, jumping up and down.

"Happy birthday, Evie," I said, smiling over at her.

"Thank you, Uncle Rowan."

She ran over to Dad and he lifted her up and threw her in the air, catching her on her way down. My dad might have been harsh with his own kids growing up, but he had a soft spot for all his grandchildren.

"Happy birthday, baby," he said, kissing her cheek as he held her in his arms. "What do you think about this house?"

"It's amazing!" Evie happily squealed.

Charlie walked over with his hands on his hips, looking around the yard at all the decorations.

"I guess Mom didn't waste any time," he said as he stepped next to me.

"She's a little over the top," I replied.

"As long as Evie's happy, that's okay with me," he told me with a grin, smacking me on the shoulder.

Dad walked away with Evie still in his arms, leaving Charlie and me alone.

"So how's life with Adam and Graham?" he asked, quirking his head to the side slightly.

"As good as I expected it to be," I said, turning to face him completely.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means it's going how I expected it to go," I said, crossing my arms over my chest. "It's not horrible, it's not great, it just is."

Charlie stared at me with his lips pressed tightly together. His expression told me that what I said wasn't what he wanted to hear.

"Are you going to stay there?" he asked after a few moments.

"For now," I replied. "Until I find something else. I applied to a few places and I'm just waiting to hear back."

"You know, you can stay with us if staying with Adam isn't working out," Charlie offered. "I know it's not ideal, but the offer stands."

"Thanks, Charlie."

Charlie had grown up a lot over the years. I supposed getting married and having kids did that to a person. But when we were growing up, he wasn't as nice to me as he was being now. He always picked on Adam and me and Dean would have to intervene at times. Charlie liked a good joke, and when we were kids, he was okay with us being at the center of them.

The rest of our family showed up soon after, except for Adam and Graham, and everyone was standing around Dean and Nora. Mom was talking a mile a minute to Nora, who was just smiling over at her while holding on tightly to Dean's hand.

"Hi, Nora," I greeted her with a wave. She looked over at me and her smile widened.

"Hey Rowan!" she replied. "It's so good to see you again."

"You two met?" Mom asked me, placing her hands on her hips. "When was this?"

"We hung out the other day," I said, stepping closer to Mom, but she turned away from me and continued talking to Nora.

"Do you want a tour of the house, Nora? I'll show you around," Mom offered, gesturing for her to follow. Nora pulled Dean along with her as Mom brought them into the house, passing Cade as he came outside.

"What, did you just wake up, kid?" Charlie called out to him, noting the sweatpants and wrinkled t-shirt Cade was wearing.

"I had a busy night," he said with a yawn, stretching his arms up over his head.

"Oh yeah? Doing what?"

"You wouldn't get it." Cade turned to look at me and smirked. "I heard something funny about you and Tim."

I groaned and shook my head at him.

"Don't even," I said.

"What happened with Tim?" Charlie asked, looking between us. "Tim that works at the shop?"

Cade chuckled as I glared at him. "Yeah, Tim from the shop."

"Tell me," Charlie whined. "I wanna know what happened!"

"What happened with what?" Adam asked, suddenly appearing in the back doorway of the house before stepping outside with Graham right behind him.

Both of them were holding gifts for Evie that they set down before walking over to us. Graham steered clear of me like I knew he would. He stood on the other side of Adam which put him and Cade between us. I could tell he was trying his best to act casual, but I could still feel the awkward tension in the air.

"What happened with Tim and Rowan," Charlie answered.

"Nothing happened," I said, tearing my gaze off of Graham and bringing it to Charlie.

Adam rolled his eyes. "Tim was coming onto him the other night when he was over. He was drunk."

Charlie's eyes widened before he let out a loud laugh. He could barely catch his breath as he bent over, hands on his knees.

"I don't see how it's that funny," I said, my voice filled with irritation.

"How can you not?" Charlie asked.

I was surprised tears weren't coming out of his eyes with how hard he was laughing. Cade started laughing along with him, but Adam and Graham didn't join in.

"Because it was just some drunk guy hanging all over me?" I said. "And trying to get into my pants."

"Was he actually touching you?" Charlie asked, sobering up a bit but keeping the grin on his face.

"Yeah, he was clinging to me," I replied.

"It's just funny that it was Tim," Charlie added, earning a nod of agreement from Cade. "Tim's a funny guy. He's always doing something stupid. This time it was trying to get with you."

"Tim did what?" Dad asked from behind us, looking angry.

I winced at his voice and turned to face him. The last thing I wanted was Dad saying something to Tim and embarrassing me. I didn't want him knowing I had talked about this with my family, even if it was unwillingly.

"Nothing," I answered before anyone else could. "It was nothing."

Dad looked as if he didn't believe me, so he turned to Cade.

"I wasn't there, but he apparently he was drunk over at Adam's the other night and was flirting with Rowan," Cade told him.

Dad sighed, rubbing his hand on his forehead.

"I don't even want to know," Dad muttered before walking away. Once he was out of earshot, Charlie and Cade exploded into laughter again.

Evie ran over and threw herself at Adam's legs, wrapping her arms around them.

"Hi Uncle Adam!" she said, grinning up at him. He placed one hand on her back, smiling down at her.

"Hi, Evie, happy birthday," he replied, then she moved onto Graham.

"Hi Uncle Graham!"

Graham lifted her up and placed a kiss on her cheek, eliciting a shrill giggle from Evie.

"Happy birthday, sweetheart," he said and I had to look away. There was something so attractive about guys who were good with kids, and I wasn't going to let myself drool over Graham while he was avoiding me. I had at least a little self respect.

A little while later, the party was in full swing with the rest of the extended family and Evie's friends from school showing up. I had taken a spot at one of the folding tables Mom had set up with Dean and Nora. Eventually, Adam, Graham, and Cade joined us. Camilla and Jared had joined us briefly, but they had gotten pulled away to watch their own kids and help Mom with whatever she was doing. I knew it was only a matter of time before Mom gave me a job, so I savored being able to sit while it lasted.

"I didn't want to bring my girlfriend here," I heard Cade say as I tuned into the conversation. He was currently talking to Dean, who was looking at him with raised eyebrows.

"Is it the same one from last time?" Dean asked. "Natalie?"

"No, Natalie and I broke up," Cade answered with an eye roll. "My new girlfriend is named Emily."

"Have you ever tried just being single?" Graham asked him. It was the first time I heard him speak in a while. "Because it seems like you just have girlfriends to have them."

"I like having girlfriends," Cade replied.

Graham shrugged at him then his eyes briefly met mine before he quickly averted his gaze. It was like he could feel me looking at him.

"What? There's nothing wrong with it," Cade said, looking between everyone at the table. "I don't see the point in having a long term relationship at my age."

"So you go into it knowing it's not going to last?" I asked him and he narrowed his eyes at me.

Cade scoffed. "Sorry if being with the same person for three years doesn't appeal to me yet. Look how well it turned out for you."

That blow didn't go unnoticed by everyone at the table. Even Adam glared at Cade for what he has just said to me. I knew Cade didn't mean anything by it. He just said things to say them, without thinking about it.

"Cade!" Dean snapped, smacking him in the shoulder. "That was uncalled for." Nora looked confused but sent a comforting smile toward me anyway.

"Sorry," Cade mumbled, rubbing his shoulder. "I shouldn't have said that."

I stood up from the table. "I'm going to go see if Mom needs help with anything."

As I walked away, I saw Dean smack Cade's shoulder again out of the corner of my eye. I entered the house and Mom was scrambling around the kitchen, trying to clean up a bit before Evie started opening up her presents.

"Mom, let me do this," I said, placing a hand on her shoulder. "You've been moving nonstop all day. Go relax."

She let out a deep breath. "You know I can't relax while I'm hosting."

"Well, go mingle then," I said.

"You sure you got this?" she asked, gesturing toward the kitchen.

It wasn't as messy as she was making it seem. Some things needed to be washed while others just needed to be put away. It would be the perfect excuse to get me away from my brothers and Graham for a little while.

"I'm sure," I assured her. "Go outside and see everybody."

"I do want to talk more with Nora," she said, wiping her hands on a kitchen towel. "She seems so sweet. I'm so happy Dean brought her."

"Go ahead."

With that, Mom left the kitchen and went out to the backyard. I saw her claim the seat I was once in, then I started working on the kitchen. A few moments later, the sliding glass door opened and I turned to see Graham walking in. His eyes met mine briefly before he turned them to the floor and walked past me toward the bathroom.

I tried not to let that anger me, but it was no use. I was sick of the tension and the acting like I was invisible, so when he came out of the bathroom, I stood in front of him and stopped him in his tracks.

"Can we stop this?" I asked, crossing my arms over my chest. Graham looked up from the floor to meet my gaze.

"Stop what?"

"You've been avoiding me."

His expression didn't reveal anything about how he felt, but he feigned ignorance.

"I don't really know what you're talking about," he replied.

"Yes, you do," I argued, stepping closer to him. "You've been ignoring me since that morning you woke up in my bed. It's getting old."

Graham's eyes widened and darted behind me as if he was making sure no one was around to hear what I had said. Quite frankly, I didn't care if anyone knew, not even Adam, because it wasn't even a big deal. What should have been a stupid, funny, drunk story turned into this secret that Graham was trying to keep and act like never happened.

"I'm not ignoring you," Graham said, bringing his eyes back to mine. "I just don't talk to you."

I let out a humorless laugh. "Yeah, that's what it seemed like *before* you got into my bed. You were talking to me all the time."

He lifted his shoulder in his famous shrug and it made me want to scream at him.

"I'm not acting any different than I was before," he said. It was a lie and he knew it. "And stop talking about that. Can we agree to never bring it up again?"

"Not until you get over it," I snapped. "Not until you stop acting weird around me and realize it's actually not that big of a deal."

"I know it's not."

"Then stop acting so weird!"

Graham let out a deep breath and gave me a look like *I* was the one being difficult and not him.

"We can both act like adults and move past this," I said, bringing my voice lower. "And you can just go back to normal instead of being awkward around me."

I wanted him to just agree with me and bring us back to normal. I couldn't tell if it was because I was desperate for at least one person I lived with to act like I wasn't a bother and he would be the easiest convince, or, if I just wanted this because it was Graham. I decided it didn't matter which it was.

Graham was saved from saying anything when Adam came into the kitchen to tell us that Evie was about to open her presents. He sprung away from me like we were caught in a compromising position and followed Adam back outside, leaving me alone in the kitchen with my thoughts and knowing I had made no progress with Graham.

I let out a high pitched huff and stomped outside.

**

Thanks for reading!!
Please leave your thoughts :)

08

Rowan Warner

Despite my better judgement, I followed Janet's advice the following weekend about getting on a dating app and finding someone to hookup with. I went the whole week after Evie's party continuing getting ignored by Graham and arguing with Adam and it made me realize how lonely I really was.

I didn't have many of my own friends. Most of the friends I did have were Brendan's. That was the thing when you broke up with someone, you lost them and you lost everything that came with them. Some of Brendan's friends had reached out to me, clearly not aware of why the two of us broke up, but I didn't answer them. Part of me didn't want to be friends with Brendan's friends anymore and the other part was scared they'd take his side even after knowing what he had done to me. So it was best to just stay away.

Most of the friends I had that were my own had moved away for college and had permanently relocated to their college town after graduating. I kept in touch with a lot of them, but I couldn't just up and leave to go visit them. So my only friend at the moment was Janet and I wasn't sure she actually counted since she was my boss. I was going to count her anyway.

All that loneliness had driven me to the dating app. When I downloaded it and started swiping, I wasn't even sure what I was looking for. Some of these guys obviously wanted a relationship and that was definitely not what I wanted at the moment. Some obviously just wanted a hookup and I wasn't sure I wanted to just start hooking up with random guys I met on the internet.

Eventually, I found a cute enough guy that had in his bio that he was looking to get drinks with someone and "see what happens." That was good

enough for me so I swiped right on him and was instantly told we were a match.

I didn't exactly know how to talk to someone on a dating app and I struggled with thinking of what I wanted to say. Luckily, I didn't have to say anything because the guy, Garrett, said something first.

From: Garrett
Hi Rowan. Glad we're a match :)

I was so bad at this. I had no idea what to say. I almost closed out the app completely and deleted it out of frustration, but then another message came in from Garrett.

From: Garrett
I'd love to take you out for drinks tonight if you're interested.

I should just do it. What was the point in rejecting him? This was exactly the reason I matched with him in the first place.

I let out a deep breath and replied to him, telling him I'd love to go out for drinks even as I was sweating buckets as I typed it. He sent me a place and a time and after that moment I had a date for the night.

What did you even wear for a first date? I had no idea. The first date I had with Brendan was after we had already started dating and knew I didn't have to do much to impress him. I didn't even know if I cared about impressing this guy, yet I was nervous about going out with him. This was the problem with being in a long term relationship all throughout college. I had *no idea* what the dating scene was like. I didn't know what to wear or how to act or if it was expected that I would sleep with this guy at the end of the night.

I let out a loud groan and sprung up off my bed to start digging through my closet for something to wear. Eventually, I settled on a charcoal gray button down shirt and dark jeans that were loose fitting in the legs, but hugged my hips nicely. It seemed like a good combination between dressy and casual.

It showed I cared enough to look nice without being overdressed. Maybe I was thinking too much about this.

After I set out my clothes, I got into the shower then brushed my teeth and did my hair. By the time I got out of the bathroom, I was rushing around as I finished getting ready. I got dressed, then decided I didn't like how my hair looked so I ran my hand through it to mess it up a little. When I looked at myself in the mirror, I was second guessing my outfit and started going through my closet again.

Then, I thought about clothes I had in the dryer that I might want to wear and rushed downstairs, gaining the attention of Adam and Graham who were sitting on the couch.

"Why are you pacing around up there?" Adam snapped, turning to look at me. Graham stayed facing the TV.

"I'm getting ready!" I told him, rushing into the laundry room and pulling my clothes out of the dryer, putting them into a basket.

"Getting ready for what?" he asked when I came out of the laundry room.

"I have a date." That caught Graham's attention, his head whipping around to look at me. His eyes glanced up and down my body, taking in my outfit.

"Date?" Adam asked. "Since when are you dating?"

"Since today."

I ran up the stairs and into my room before dumping my basket of clothes onto the bed. Nothing else seemed right to wear and I was running out of time, so I shoved everything back into the basket and went downstairs.

"You're actually going on a date?" Adam asked me, eyebrows raised in suspicion.

"Yes, Adam, that's why I said that's what I'm doing," I replied, irritation clear in my tone. "Where are my car keys?"

"Hanging where you always put them," Adam said gesturing toward the key hooks by the door. That was something I bought for the house that only I use. Apparently, Adam and Graham never lost their keys and always had them either in their pockets or hooked to their belt loops.

Graham was looking at me as I walked over to the door and plucked my keys off the hook. I turned and looked at the both of them, holding my arms out.

"How do I look?" I asked.

They both gave me blank stares, though Graham looked me up and down again.

"Like my brother," Adam said and I knew that was the best I would get out of him.

"Perfect," I said, patting my pockets to make sure I had my wallet. "I'll be back later. Or maybe not. I don't know."

I didn't wait for any response before walking out of the house and into my car.

When I got to the restaurant, I had agreed to meet Garrett at, I almost turned the car around and went back home. But then I talked some sense into myself and got out of the car and went inside. He was already there when I walked in, sitting at the bar with a drink in front of him. He glanced over at the door and smiled when he saw me, standing up from his seat and waving me over to him.

I was relieved to see that he looked exactly like his pictures, and I wasn't being catfished. That was something that always scared me about online dating, but I was soon scared by something else when I really looked at him.

Garrett looked just like Graham.

He had the same curly brown hair, only his was a little shorter. They shared similar facial features like their sharp jawlines, their full, pink lips, and their wide green eyes. I had gotten myself a date with someone that somehow looked just like Graham. They even had similar names.

"Rowan! I'm glad you came," Graham— *Garrett* greeted as I made my way over to the bar.

"Thanks for inviting me," I said with a tight smile. We both sat down on the barstools, and I quickly ordered a drink.

"Of course," Garrett replied. "It's kinda hard to get a date around here. Not a lot of guys respond. I've been stood up plenty of times."

"Really?" I asked just as the bartender set my drink down in front of me.

"Yeah, haven't you?" he wondered. "Or is everyone you talk to smart enough not to pass up a date with you?" He laughed, sipping on his cocktail.

I let out an awkward laugh of my own. "This is actually my first time meeting up with someone like this." I didn't know if I should've said that, if it would scare him off or make things weird. I obviously didn't know how this online dating thing worked.

"It is?" Garrett asked with wide eyes, surprise clear in his tone. "Your first time meeting someone online or meeting up with someone at all?"

"Well, I just got out of a long-term relationship," I answered, sipping on my own drink. "So, I haven't done the online dating thing or the dating thing at all really."

Luckily, the bruise on my face had healed so I wouldn't be getting any questions about it from Garrett. There were a few on my stomach that were still healing, but they had faded enough. He wouldn't see them unless I took my shirt off around him anyway, and I didn't know if this was even that kind of date.

"Oh, I see," he said, smirking over the rim of his glass. "You're getting yourself out there."

"Kind of."

"Well, I'm glad you're starting with me," Garrett said. "I've been at this for a while."

"Really?" I tried not to think about how that could possibly be a red flag. It wasn't like I was looking to be with him forever. I was just having a few drinks and maybe having sex later, that was it.

"Yeah, a few guys lasted a little while, but no one stuck," he replied, shrugging in a similar fashion to Graham. "It was getting depressing for a while, but I've learned to enjoy it."

Garrett was a little older than me and had obviously been working on the dating scene for a while and that knowledge did nothing to relax me. But after having a couple more drinks, I began to relax. The two of us shared an appetizer and shared small talk. It was nothing profound, but I had a nice enough time.

"So," Garrett started as I finished my last drink. "I know you're new to this, so if you don't want to that's totally fine, but I'd figure I'd offer to have you come back to my place anyway."

"Like for sex?" I asked, my filter depleting after only having a few drinks.

Garrett laughed loudly. "Yeah, if you want to be straight forward about it."

And that was how I ended up leaving with Garrett in his car and going to his place. He lived in an apartment by himself on the other side of town. When we got there, he brought me up to his room and the two of us started making out on the bed before clothes started coming off and we went further.

It felt weird when I thought too much about it. I had only ever been with two people other than Brendan and for the last three years, I had *only* been

with Brendan. I was so accustomed to the way he liked things; I didn't know how to do this casually with someone I didn't know anything about. Luckily, Garrett guided me through it, and it ended up being a lot better than I thought it would be.

The problem was, I couldn't look at him because if I did, I would think about Graham. And Graham was one of the last people I needed to be thinking about while I had sex.

When we finished, the two of us were lying in his bed for a while, my head on his bare chest and his arm around me. We didn't say anything for a little bit until Garrett finally spoke up.

"That was amazing," he said, slightly breathless. "I know you're only doing the casual thing right now, but if you're ever up to do this again sometime, text me."

I sat up, looking down at him, and I couldn't help but imagine what Graham looked like in this state. Sweaty, tired, and happy from a good round of sex. I was sure he looked even better than Garrett did, but why on earth was I thinking about Graham all of a sudden? He started consuming my mind more and more after he began avoiding me and now, I was thinking about him after having sex with someone else.

This wasn't good. It just wasn't good at all.

"I'll keep that in mind," I said before getting up from the bed to get my clothes. "Can you drive me back to my car or should I get an Uber?"

"I can drive you," he offered, getting up from the bed and finding his own clothes. "You don't want to get in the Ubers in this town, trust me."

"I'll take your word for it."

Garrett drove me back to the restaurant where I had left my car and leaned across the center console to give me a brief kiss.

"I had a great time," Garrett said with a smile. "Don't be a stranger if you're ever wanting to do this again."

"I had a good time too," I told him. And it was the truth, besides all the times I was thinking about Graham, but that wasn't his fault. "And maybe I will."

I got out of the car and got into my own, waving goodbye to Garrett as I pulled out of the parking lot.

As I pulled into the driveway at home, I saw the living room light was still on. A moment later, it shut off. Adam must have been waiting up for me but didn't want me to know it. I went inside and locked the door behind me, kicking off shoes in the hall closet before throwing myself down on the couch, lighting my pine candle, and turning on the TV.

I was simultaneously tired yet too awake to fall asleep. My body was exhausted but my mind was alive, so I stayed on the couch and watched TV for a few hours before eventually falling asleep.

It wasn't until the morning that I was woken up by the voices of Adam and Graham.

"Did you put this blanket on him?" I heard Adam ask from behind the couch.

"Uh, yeah," Graham answered. "I came downstairs last night, and he was asleep down here with the TV on. Why?"

"He just always wraps his blankets around him when he sleeps," Adam replied. "So, I thought it was weird that he didn't"

"Did you talk to him when he came home last night?"

"No," Adam said. "I went upstairs before he came inside. I don't know why he slept down here."

I groaned, turning over on the couch and opening my eyes to see the two of them looking down at me.

"Your date tire you out?" Adam asked in a snarky tone. Graham glared at him and punched his shoulder.

"A little bit," I said, sitting up and rubbing my head with my hand. "I haven't stayed out that late in a while."

"Were you trying to burn the house down by lighting your candle and falling asleep?"

"Obviously not."

"Just take that shit upstairs before I throw it away," Adam warned, walking out of the living room.

I shared one glance with Graham and the memories of all the times I thought about him last night came rushing back. This time, I was the one to look away from him and he left the room.

**

Thanks for reading let me know what you think!

09

Rowan Warner

It turned out that going on a date and having sex did nothing to curb the loneliness I had been feeling and may have even made it worse. Trying to fill my life with meaningless relationships with no real connection wasn't going to work out, that much was obvious. And as the days went on, it got even harder to keep living with Adam and Graham.

If it wasn't Graham making every single interaction we had awkward as hell, it was Adam being rude and making a comment about every single thing I did.

He complained when I cooked, he complained when I cleaned, he even complained when I didn't shut my bedroom door all the way and he could see the light from my room pouring into the hallway. He was being ridiculous, and I didn't know how much longer I could take it.

It was one thing to have some brotherly arguments, but I was beginning to think that Adam was actively trying to push me to the edge so I would leave, and he was almost succeeding.

I had heard back from two of the apartments I had applied to, and they told me that the rentals were given to someone else. It was just as well that it ended up like that because I knew those weren't places I wanted to live anyway. I just wanted to get out of Adam's house before he really pushed me over the edge which would be soon if he kept treating me the way he was.

It was Monday afternoon and I had just gotten home from work. Adam had told me that he and Graham would be a little later today because they agreed to do something for Dad at the shop. I used the alone time to finally have some peace in this house without having to deal with either of my roommates.

I lit my pine candle and started cooking dinner. Although Adam had been complaining more and more about everything I did, he started eating the food I cooked, so now I was cooking for the three of us. It was better than the two of them getting takeout every night. They would never thank me for it, but I would continue doing it anyway.

Dinner was ready by the time Adam and Graham finally got home, but neither of them came into the kitchen. Adam was stomping around upstairs, clearly angry about something from work. He stomped back downstairs after a few minutes and came storming into the kitchen, holding my pine candle that was now blown out.

"I made—" I started, but Adam cut me off.

"Rowan, how many fucking times do I have to tell you to take this shit upstairs!" he exclaimed, shoving the candle into my hands. "Do you just do it to be annoying or are you that fucking stupid?"

Graham came rushing into the kitchen with a bewildered look on his face.

"Adam," Graham called out in a warning tone.

"Adam, you need to chill out," I snapped. "I don't know what has you so mad, but I'm not letting you take it out on me."

"It is you!" Adam shouted. "I have to deal with a bunch of shit at work and then I have to come home and deal with your shit and I'm sick of it!"

"It's a fucking candle, Adam!"

"One that I told you to put upstairs, but you keep lighting it down here anyway!" he responded. "Because you don't respect that this isn't just your space."

"God forbid you come home from a shitty day at work with a candle lit and dinner made for you," I sarcastically replied.

"It's not just about the stupid fucking candle," Adam seethed. "It's you keeping it down here after I said I didn't want it down here because you

don't appreciate what I'm doing for you by letting you stay here."

My mouth angled down in a frown. That last remark had been the last straw and he was about to see an explosion.

"What you're doing for *me* ?" I asked, my grip tightening on the candle. "I didn't realize having me move in with you, while you were looking for a third roommate might I add, was such a big fucking favor. Do I need to remind you that I didn't ask for this? I was going to take care of myself!"

"Yet you're here and you're not getting out fast enough!"

"I wish I could!" I shouted, louder than I intended to. "I've been trying to get out of here because I can't deal with being here any longer!"

"Then go!" Adam shouted back. "If you hate it here so much, then go!"

" *Adam* ," Graham said, urging his friend to stop.

"What does it take to make you happy, Adam? Huh?" I asked, opening up the trash can. "Do you want me to throw away this candle? If it's that fucking important, I will!" I threw the candle in the trash and closed the lid.

"It's not just about the stupid candle!" Adam repeated furiously.

"Then tell me how to make you happy!" I urged, feeling tears forming in my eyes. "Because I can't deal with this anymore!"

I spoke again just as Adam was going to say something.

"You know I've never lived anywhere that I could just be at *peace* ?" I told him. "I spent my whole childhood living with a brother who hated me, and I never understood why, then I moved out for college and lived with homophobes for my first two years, and then I moved in with Brendan who fucking abused me every day for three years!"

The tears had started leaking from my eyes and Adam's expression turned from one of anger to one of bewilderment.

"And now I'm here!" I cried, throwing my hands up. "And you still hate me and your friend acts like I don't exist, and I can't do anything to make this place feel like a home for me because one fucking candle is enough to set you off!"

I continued, "And, you know, I went through something really traumatic with Brendan that makes it hard for me to even feel safe here, and you do *nothing* to make that any easier for me. You don't even care about what happened to me."

"Rowan—"

"I've *never* been able to just live somewhere," I cut Adam off, wiping the tears from my eyes. "Because everywhere I've lived there's always been something that made me not want to be there. So, yes, I want to get the fuck out of here, Adam, probably more than you want me gone, so I'll go. I'll be out by tomorrow."

I started to leave the kitchen, but Adam caught me by the arm before I could go.

"Rowan, just wait a second," he said. I pulled out of his grip.

"Leave me alone right now, Adam," I snapped, sending him a glare and pushing past Graham to get out of the kitchen. "Enjoy your dinner."

I scurried up the stairs and slammed my bedroom door shut before throwing myself onto my bed and wrapping my blankets around me. Then I cried into my pillow, thinking about how pathetic I felt after blowing up at Adam in front of Graham. I didn't want either of them knowing I felt that way. It was too embarrassing to admit that the way Adam treated me had gotten to me, to admit that whenever I lived somewhere I was just waiting to get to the next place to be better.

I didn't want them knowing how I really felt about my time with Brendan, and admitting I was traumatized by it to the both of them made me want to shrivel up and die.

It could have been hours or minutes since I came upstairs to my room. I hadn't kept track of the time, but I was still crying when there was a soft knock on my door before whoever was on the other side opened it and closed it behind them.

"Row," Adam said softly, sitting down on the bed. "I got your candle out of the trash."

He tried to show it to me, but I covered my face with the blanket. I didn't want him seeing me cry more than he already had.

Adam sighed and I heard him place the candle down on the nightstand. He was silent for a moment before he placed a hand on my arm and started speaking.

"Look, I shouldn't have been taking out my frustration on you," Adam started. "Dad just got me riled up at work today. He was getting on me about something and then somehow the topic of you came up and he got me mad by saying I wasn't being good to you just because I was letting you live here, and it was something I owed you."

I didn't respond, so he continued.

"Which I guess is right, but it made me mad at the time," Adam said and let out another sigh. "And then I got home and saw the candle and it just brought all that back and I was angry at you for no reason. I know it's just excuses, but that's what it was."

We sat in silence for a few moments, and I was sure Adam was about to get up and leave, but he didn't.

"I didn't know things were that bad with Brendan," he said softly. "Or that it had been happening the whole time."

He didn't know because no one did. I didn't want anyone knowing about it while it was going on. It was embarrassing and I felt stupid for staying with him, but I didn't feel like I could leave. It was a vicious cycle that I finally broke free of.

"Are you going to talk to me?" he asked, clearly getting frustrated. I didn't think I owed him a response. None of what he said was even an apology.

"Leave me alone, Adam," I said through my tears, my voice muffled by my blankets.

He didn't say anything. He just patted me on the arm and stood up from the bed, leaving the room. And I stayed there for the rest of the night.

It wasn't until the next afternoon that I saw Adam and Graham again. I stayed in my room until they left for work and then I quickly got ready and headed to my own job. I got home before both of them again and heated leftovers for dinner, then went up to my room to pack my things.

After what had happened yesterday with Adam, I was ready to get out of this place immediately, so I called my mom at my lunch time and said I needed to stay with my parents for a little while. Of course, she got all concerned and asked what happened with Adam. I didn't have the heart to tell her that her son is a huge asshole that hates me for no reason, and I couldn't stand living with him any longer.

She was going to call Adam, but I told her not to. Once Dad saw that I was going to be moving in with them, he would rip Adam a new one. I couldn't find it in me to care.

I wasn't quick enough with packing to get out of here before Adam and Graham got home, so I was carrying a box down the stairs when I came face-to-face with my brother and his friend.

"What are you doing?" Adam asked, stopping in front of me.

"I told you I would be gone today," I replied, trying to step around him. Adam stood in front of me, blocking the way.

"Where are you going to go?"

"Not that it should matter to you, but I'm going back to Mom and Dad's."

Adam glared at me and took a hold of the box in my arms, trying to get it away from me.

"You're not moving back there," Adam denied. Both of us had a grip on the box and neither of us were going to let go of it. "You specifically said you wouldn't move back there."

"Well, I don't have much of a choice, now do I?" I shot back at him, yanking on the box.

"Yeah, you do. You're staying here." He yanked the box back.

"You literally told me yesterday to leave."

"I take that back."

"Adam," I groaned. "Just let me go. Neither of you even want me here."

"That's not true," Graham piped in, but he didn't elaborate. I glanced at him before letting go of the box and letting Adam hold it.

"Fine, Adam, take that out to my car," I said, turning to go back up the stairs. "I'll go grab another box."

"I'm putting this back in your room and you're staying here," Adam responded, following me up the steps with Graham close behind.

When we got to my room, I turned to face the two of them with an expectant look.

"What's with the change of heart?" I asked, placing my hands on my hips. "You don't need to feel sorry for me about what I said yesterday. Just forget about it."

"I don't feel sorry for you," Adam instantly replied, setting the box down on my floor. "I just don't want to hear it from Mom and Dad about you moving out of here." He turned to leave the room. "I'm taking a shower. You better be here when I get out."

And with that, he left. Graham stayed in the doorway, leaning against the frame. He didn't say anything until he heard the water from the shower turn on.

"Can we talk for a minute?" he asked me.

"Are you talking to me now?" I retorted.

He rolled his eyes and came further into the room, closing the door behind him.

"I just wanted to say I'm sorry if me being weird around you was making it hard for you to live here," he said. "I know you said that what happened with us wasn't a big deal, but, uh, I guess it was to me."

"I have more things to worry about than you accidentally climbing into bed with me," I told him.

"I just don't want you to think I was coming onto you like Tim," Graham replied, running his hand through his hair. "And I really didn't want Adam finding out about it."

I scoffed, leaning back against my dresser. "Why would Adam care?"

"Because he knows I'm bisexual and would think I was coming onto you."

"You're... what?" This new information seemed to knock the wind out of me. Never in all my years of knowing Graham had I suspected he was interested in men.

"He's one of the only people that know," Graham told me, ignoring the shock on my face. "Along with the guys I've hooked up with, I guess. And now you."

"That's... wow. I wasn't expecting that."

Graham shrugged. "I guess I was just worried about Adam thinking something was going on. And now you know why and I'm sorry."

Without knowing it, Graham just made this whole situation so much worse for me. It was one thing to think about how attractive Graham was while thinking he was straight. Now I knew that he wasn't and that would let my imagination run wild. It was different than him being unavailable because he wasn't attracted to men. Now he was unavailable for me with Adam being the sole reason. And that made this worse.

"So, I hope you decide to stay," Graham continued, opening the door to leave. "Because if you don't, then we have to find someone else to pay a third."

And then Graham shut the door, leaving me speechless.

**

Thanks for reading ! leave your thoughts

10

Rowan Warner

It wasn't until Friday that I told Janet I had taken her advice. I hadn't told her sooner because I was embarrassed by it, mostly because it hadn't worked and because the guy I chose ended up only reminding me of Graham.

I chose today to tell her because I would be leaving early and she couldn't pester me all day about it. Apparently my car needed maintenance that I had no idea about and my father had made an appointment for me at the shop. All I had to do was show up, and I had no idea what they were even doing to my car.

"So what happened with this guy?" Janet excitedly asked at lunch time, the two of us walking across the parking lot of our plaza to our favorite cafe.

"We just had some drinks," I said, intentionally leaving out the rest. "It was nice, but I don't think I'm gonna do it again."

"Whyyyy," Janet whined. "It's good to get yourself out there!"

"I don't know if I'm ready."

I wouldn't add the fact that I now knew Graham was bisexual and it was all I could think about. Or the fact that he was practically all I could think about on my date because I subconsciously picked someone that looked like him. And now that I knew of his sexuality, I couldn't tell if I actually wanted him or if I just wanted him because of how unavailable he was to me.

"Maybe I'm just projecting on you," Janet said, pulling me from my thoughts. "I've been telling myself to start with the dating apps for over a year and I haven't."

"You should try it," I said. "I kinda lucked out and didn't get a weirdo. You just have to be selective with who you're picking."

"I'm so touch starved, I don't know how selective I can be," she said, opening the cafe door for me as I laughed at her words behind her.

The two of us ordered our sandwiches and coffees and brought them to a small circular table outside.

"So how's the living situation going?" Janet asked as she unwrapped her sandwich.

"Better than it was."

Ever since that fight Adam and I had, I could tell he was doing his best to treat me better. He wasn't all of a sudden being kind, but he stopped complaining about everything I did and wasn't making me feel like I was a burden placed on him, and that was enough for me. As for Graham, things were pretty much back to normal with us except for the fact I was now extremely attracted to him and extremely aware he was attracted to men.

"I was literally about to move out the other day," I added. "I started packing and everything."

"Shut up!" Janet exclaimed. "Really? What happened?"

"Adam had a bad day and took it out on me and I was sick of it," I told her before taking a bite of my sandwich. "So I freaked out, and the next day I packed my shit to move out, but he convinced me to stay and it's been better."

"He thought he could treat you like shit and you would just take it," Janet replied, rolling her eyes. "I hope you gave him a taste of his own medicine! I've never even met this guy and I want to have words with him."

I laughed. "I'm not too sure you two having words with each other would be a good idea."

"I can be civil," she said.

"Can you?"

Janet glared and flicked a piece of lettuce at me that fell from her sandwich. I brushed it off where it had landed on my arm.

"Maybe I'll introduce you some day," I told her with a grin. "You'll see how it's not a good idea."

"If he's just nice to you, then there's nothing to worry about."

The two of us finished our lunches and walked back over to the bank with a few minutes left on our break to spare. When we walked inside, I noticed a familiar figure in a mechanic uniform standing with one of the tellers.

"Adam?" I asked, walking over to him. His expression told me he was less than thrilled to be here.

He stood with his hands braced on the desk in front of him, leaning forward. His mouth was turned to a frown and he had a pen tucked behind his ear like he expected to need it. When he turned to face me, his expression was sour.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, leaning against the desk desk to him as the teller typed on the computer.

"The office girl called out sick for the week," Adam told me. "So Dad's sending me to deposit the checks instead of literally anyone else."

"I don't feel bad. This used to be my job when I worked there."

Adam scoffed and looked away from me briefly, then turned back when he realized the teller wasn't done with what she was doing.

"You remember you have to bring your car in today?" he asked me.

"Yes, I don't know what for, but I'll bring it," I replied. He rolled his eyes at me.

"Dad wants to give it a look over and do any maintenance on it because you have to get a new inspection sticker next month," Adam explained.

"Oh. I do?"

Adam closed his eyes and let out a breath like he was holding himself back from snapping at me.

"Yes, you do," he said, opening his eyes. "You're lucky Dad keeps track of this stuff for you. You're hopeless."

"Is this Adam?" Janet questioned before I could respond, walking over to us with her arms crossed over her chest.

"Yes, Janet this is my brother Adam," I told her, my voice tight. I was hoping the look on my face was communicating for her that I didn't want her to start anything with him. She already had an opinion on him based on what I had told her. "Adam, this is my manager, Janet."

He glanced at her and gave her a nod in greeting. Janet kept her cool, but I could tell that annoyed her.

"Good to meet you, Adam," she said in a clipped tone, holding out her hand for him to shake. He stood up straight and hesitated before briefly shaking her hand. "I've heard a lot about you."

"You have?" He looked over at me with a strange expression.

"All my complaints," I told him and he narrowed his eyes at me.

"We tell each other a lot," Janet added, moving to stand beside me.

"Great," Adam sarcastically replied.

"You're all set," the teller told Adam, handing him a receipt.

He nodded at her. "Thanks."

Adam turned back to Janet and me, shoving the paper in his pocket.

"I thought I had lucked out when you weren't here when I got here, but I guess not," Adam remarked, briefly glancing over at Janet, then back at me.

"And you'll see me again later at the shop," I said with a smug expression. "And then at home."

Adam let out a frustrated sigh. "Can't wait."

He walked around Janet and me, not even bothering to say goodbye before he left the bank. Janet followed me back to my office and shut the door behind her, standing in front of my desk with her hands on her hips as I sat down.

"Yes?" I asked her.

"Your brother *is* an asshole," she said.

"Yes, I know," I replied. "We already established that."

"And he's hot!" she exclaimed, throwing her hands up. "Why didn't you tell me he's hot?"

My eyes widened and I leaned forward in my chair.

"Why the hell would I tell you that?" I asked. "He's my brother! I don't think about him like that!"

"He's banned from coming back to this bank," she said, placing her hands back on her hips. "I don't want to see that gorgeous face ever again."

"Oh my God," I groaned, leaning back in my chair. "Get out."

"Banned!" she repeated for exiting my office.

I did my best to forget that conversation as I worked the rest of the day. I briefly waved to Janet when I got up to leave and stopped for a coffee before bringing my car to the shop.

When I arrived, I parked in front of the garage door and went inside. I was instantly greeted by Dad and I held my keys out for him to take.

"I thought I told you not to park in front of the bay," Dad said, snatching the keys from my hand.

I shot him a look of confusion. "I didn't."

"Then where did you park?"

"In front of the garage door."

He glared at me. "That's the bay."

"How was I supposed to know that?" I asked. "You could just say garage."

"You did work here for a little while," Dad replied. "I thought you would have retained some information."

"The only information I retained is how much I hate cars."

Dad rolled his eyes. "Go sit in the waiting room. I'll have Adam pull your car around when we're done."

I pushed open the door near the office and walked out into the waiting room. There were a couple other customers in there, but there was one that was familiar.

"Rowan?" Garrett asked, smiling over at me.

"Oh, hey," I awkwardly replied, shoving my hands into my pockets as I sat down. I left a chair between us, thinking that would somehow be less awkward, but it was uncomfortable all the same.

"Funny seeing you here," he said. It definitely wasn't funny to me.

"Yeah, funny," I replied and Garrett chuckled at my discomfort.

"You getting anything serious done?" he asked. "You gonna be here a while?"

"I don't even know," I sheepishly admitted.

He quirked his head to the side in confusion.

"You don't know?"

"It's my dad's shop," I explained. "He just tells me to show up and I do."

"Oh, right. Your last name is Warner," he said, a look of realization overtaking his features. "Hey, I've been wanting to text you," he added, changing the subject.

"Oh."

Garrett chuckled. "I figured I'd wait and see if you texted me first."

I let out a sigh. The last thing I wanted to do was have this conversation at my dad's shop, but if it had to be done here, it would be.

"Look, I had a really great time, but I just don't think I'm ready for the dating scene," I admitted. "I only did it because I was feeling lonely and I realized that wouldn't make me feel any less lonely."

Garrett nodded. "I get it. But if you're looking for a friend I'm cool with that too."

I smiled at him. "Maybe I'll take you up on that."

Garrett was about to say something before we were interrupted by Graham walking over, keys jingling in his hand. He stopped in front of Garrett with a blank stare that would look like a glare if I didn't know any better.

"Your car's finished," Graham said, holding the keys out for Garrett to take.

"Oh, thank you," Garrett said, taking the keys as he stood up from his chair. He turned to look at me. "I'll be in touch Rowan. Hopefully we can get

together soon."

"Sure," I responded. "See you."

Graham watched as Garrett walked over to pay for whatever was done to his car. He only turned back to me when Garrett left the room entirely.

"You know him?" Graham asked, pointing his thumb toward the door Garrett had just walked out of.

"Sorta," I said, clearing my throat. "That was my date last weekend."

Graham's expression changed and he was frowning down at me.

"He seems like a douchebag," Graham said.

I couldn't help but laugh. "You got that from that short conversation you had with him?"

"No, I got that from when I was talking to him earlier about his car," Graham corrected. "He seems like an arrogant asshole."

"He's fine," I said with a shrug. "He was nice to me."

"So you're going to go out with him again?"

"I didn't say that."

Graham's expression softened at that, and he looked somewhat relieved.

"Do you know when my car will be done?" I asked when Graham didn't say anything else.

He shrugged. "I'll go talk to Adam."

He lingered for a moment like he had something else to say, but he said nothing before walking away.

Eventually, I got too bored to keep sitting in the waiting room, and listening in on the talks of the middle aged men in here about politics and cars wasn't something I wanted to be witness to anymore. So, I got up from my seat and walked back into the shop.

Dad was sitting at his desk doing paperwork and looked up at me when I walked in.

"Adam's almost done," he said. "He'll bring the keys to you."

"I can't sit in there any longer," I said, leaning against his desk. "I feel like I'm going to get hate crimed."

"What?" He raised his eyebrows and looked toward the door that led to the waiting room.

"I'm kidding," I assured him. "I just can't sit there and listen to them talk about spark plugs and how they don't think their tax dollars should go to food stamps."

Dad scoffed and looked back down at his papers.

"Those men don't know anything," Dad responded.

Just as he said that, Cade rounded the corner with Tim walking beside him. The two of them were laughing about something before they stopped in front of us, and Cade was laughing for a whole different reason while Tim looked at me with a sheepish expression.

"Out, Tim," Dad said in a warning tone, causing Cade to cackle harder.

"You're going to hold this over me forever?" Tim asked with an incredulous look.

"Did you or did you not try to sleep with my son?"

My eyes widened. "Dad! Who told you *that* ?" I knew he had heard Tim had been flirting with me, but someone must have told him something more had gone on.

"Cade did."

My eyes shifted to my younger brother, fixing a glare on him.

"You don't have to tell him things like that and that's not even what happened," I snapped at him.

"That's what Graham made it sound like," Cade replied with a grin.

I didn't even have time to respond to that before the two of them were walking away. Tim was practically running to get away while Cade laughed as he followed him.

"You don't need to be hard on Tim," I said to Dad once they were gone. "He didn't do anything."

"I just didn't know if you'd be uncomfortable around him," Dad replied. "Cade had made it sound like he was being really inappropriate with you."

"He wasn't," I denied. "I don't know if he misunderstood Graham or if Graham made it sound worse than it was, but he was just drunk. He didn't do anything."

"Okay."

A few minutes later, Adam arrived with my keys and handed them to me.

"As long as you don't do anything stupid within the next couple weeks, your car will pass inspection," Adam said, handing Dad a paper, probably outlining everything he did to the car and keeping track of things that I had no idea about.

"You checked the brakes like I asked?" Dad questioned.

"Yes, Dad," Adam replied in a monotone voice. "I did everything you asked. I even rotated the tires."

I laughed, thinking Adam was trying to be funny with that remark, but I was only met with blank stares from my father and my brother.

"Oh, that wasn't a joke?" I asked. "You actually have to... rotate the tires?" Adam let out a long sigh.

Dad muttered something under his breath and I took that as my cue to leave.

I would say that it wasn't my fault that I didn't know anything about cars, but it kind of was. My dad wanted me to learn just like the rest of his kids, but I resisted so hard that he gave up.

As I passed through the shop to leave, I saw Graham working on a car. He was bent over the open hood, messing with something inside. He looked over as I walked by and smiled, nodding at me to say goodbye.

I walked out of there so fast, mortified that he had caught me staring.

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Thanks for reading. Leave your thoughts !

11

Rowan Warner

Over the next couple of weeks, I had spent at least one night a week hanging out with Garrett. Sometimes the two of us would just go out for drinks after work. Other times, we would go to his house, and when that happened, I could tell that he was expecting something more from me. But being the idiot I was, I decided to ignore that and that was how I ended up inviting him over the house one weekend when Adam and Graham were going to be gone.

I was in the middle of cleaning the living room when Graham walked downstairs after having taken a shower. His hair was wet with his curls sticking to his forehead and he wore a tight fitting white t-shirt that had a wet spot on the chest.

"Have any plans tonight?" he asked when he saw me.

"Just having a friend over," I replied as I toss the throw blanket over the back of the couch. "You and Adam are going to John's tonight, right?"

"Right..." Graham trailed as he watched me clean. "What friend?"

"Garrett, you met him at the shop a couple weeks ago."

"The douchebag?" Graham clarified, raising his eyebrows at me.

"He's not a douchebag," I defended, though I wasn't sure the two of us had the same definition of the word. Graham probably thought a lot of people were douchebags. I, at times, tended to be too nice and too forgiving.

"He seemed like one," Graham said, moving to sit down on the couch. "So is it safe to assume you don't want us home at all tonight?"

"I don't care. It's not like I'm hooking up with him."

"Oh, you're not?" He said it in a way that seemed like he didn't believe me.

I turned and set a scowl on him. It was always a mistake setting my gaze on him for too long because then I started overly focusing on how hot I found him.

The two of us hadn't spoken about his confession about his sexuality since the conversation happened. It seemed clear that me knowing about it didn't seem to bother Graham, and I spent most of my time around him hoping that he didn't notice the attraction I felt for him.

"No, I'm not," I finally answered. "We're just friends."

"Does he know that?"

I set another scowl on him. "Yes, Graham. Why does it even matter?"

He shrugged. "I guess it doesn't."

I heard the shower go on upstairs, signaling that Adam was in there and Graham and I were free to talk without having to worry about him listening in. Part of me wanted to talk to Graham more about what he had told me, but I knew that it wasn't any of my business and if he wanted to talk more about it, he would.

He seemed to have the same idea about talking freely, knowing Adam wasn't around to hear it.

"Hey, I want to tell you something," Graham said. "Adam didn't want you to know, but I kinda think you should."

I stopped what I was doing. "What?"

"Brendan came into the shop this week," Graham told me and I couldn't exactly describe the feeling in my chest at those words. It was a shock. It felt like something that shouldn't bother me but did.

"He did?"

"Your dad wouldn't serve him," Graham went on. "He told him he wouldn't take his business anymore and Brendan got angry. I just thought you should know about it, especially if he decides to take it out on you."

I could understand why Adam and my father didn't tel me about this; they thought I couldn't handle it, that it would upset me. What I couldn't understand was why Dean hadn't said anything. The two of us texted back and forth almost every day. There were plenty of opportunities he could have told me that Brendan had gone to the shop, and it was something I did want to know about. Dean would know that.

"Did Dean see him?" I asked. "Does he know about this?"

Graham nodded. "Dean was there with your dad trying to get him out of there. Him, Adam, and your dad were."

I let out a deep breath, trying to curb my frustration.

"Thanks for telling me," I said in a strained voice. "I don't know why Dean didn't."

Graham did his signature shrug. "I don't know either."

It frustrated me that my brothers and father wanted to keep me in the dark about this. Brendan could have gone there hoping he would find me since he didn't know where I was staying. To me, and apparently to Graham, it seemed like something I should be aware of.

The shower stopped upstairs, and that stopped our conversation. Adam came down a few minutes later, dressed in similar clothes to Graham and running a towel through his hair.

"What, do you have people coming over tonight?" Adam asked, gesturing toward the spotless living room.

"His *friend* Garrett," Graham answered for me, emphasizing the word friend to say that he clearly didn't think that was what Garrett was to me. I wished

I didn't care so much about why Graham cared about that detail. I was only setting myself up for disappointment.

"Don't fuck down here," Adam said in a stern tone. "I'm serious."

I scoffed. "What part of 'friend' don't you understand?"

"The part where you have already gone on multiple dates with this guy," Adam replied in a bored tone.

"You have?" Graham asked, looking between Adam and me. "That was a detail you left out."

"Aren't you two leaving?" I asked, annoyed.

"Yes, and I'm glad we won't be here for that," Adam replied, gesturing toward the door for Graham to follow him. Adam threw his towel down on the couch, and even though I knew it wasn't just to irritate me, it felt like it was.

When they were out the door, I picked up the towel and threw it into the laundry room, opting to deal with it later. I tidied up the living room a little more, fluffing up the cushions on the couch. A little while later, Garrett showed up with a bottle of white wine in hand. Although my preferred wine was red, I could drink the white all the same.

I opened the door for him just as he reached the porch and Garrett greeted me with a hug.

"Thanks for inviting me over," he said, releasing me from the hug.

I shrugged and let him inside. "I hope you're hungry. I made dinner."

"Yeah, of course," he said. "Starving."

The two of us served ourselves dinner and I took the wine bottle from him, pouring us each some in the only two wine glasses Adam and Graham had in the cabinet.

"So, your roommates are out?" Garrett asked, taking a sip of wine.

I nodded. "Adam and Graham went to one of their friend's houses. They switch off hosting for them all to just sit in front of the TV and play video games."

"And Adam is your brother, right?"

"Yeah, Graham is his best friend," I told him. "He's the one that worked on your car at the shop the other week."

Garrett hummed. "Oh, right. The moody one."

I shot him a look of confusion. "He was moody?"

Garrett laughed over the rim of his glass. "A little bit."

Graham wasn't the friendliest guy around, but he was at least more bearable than my brother. Adam was the one most would consider the moody one, so it was strange hearing someone say it about Graham. Sure, he was quiet with people he didn't know, but I looked at it as more in a mysterious way than a moody one.

"He's not usually like that," I assured him, though I didn't know why I felt the need to. Or why I felt the need to defend Graham from someone he definitely didn't care for the opinion of.

Garrett didn't say anything else on the subject, and for that I was grateful. If he started talking more about Graham, I was worried I would say something stupid that would expose the attraction I felt toward him.

"More wine?" I asked, nodding toward Garrett's empty glass.

"Sure," he said just before I poured him more.

The two of us finished our dinners and then brought the wine and our glasses into the living room. Garrett and I each sat on a side of the couch. I curled my feet under me, getting comfortable as I looked through the

channels for something to watch. Garrett didn't seem too concerned with what we watched. He was too busy looking at me.

"Are Adam and Graham going to be out all night?" Garrett asked me as I continued scrolling.

"I don't know, maybe," I replied in a bored tone. "It depends on how much Adam drinks. Graham will take him home early and make him go to bed if he drinks too much because he won't want to deal with him."

Garrett just hummed in acknowledgement then looked toward the TV at what I picked.

He seemed distracted the whole night. He kept paying more attention to me than the TV and then when I was talking to him, he looked right at me but it felt like he wasn't listening. His mind was somewhere else. That should have been the sign that Garrett was looking for something else entirely than what I was tonight.

What really got me to notice it was the fact that he kept moving closer to me on the couch. We started out on opposite ends and he ended up sitting in the middle seat right next to me.

I didn't acknowledge that though, hoping he wouldn't try to make a move on me when he noticed I wasn't paying attention.

It probably wasn't the best idea to try to befriend Garrett, but I was desperate to have my own friends other than my boss. He had said the two of us could be just friends, but I should have known it was just a lie because he hoped he could have sex with me again if the two of us were friends. Or he was hoping for a sort of friends with benefits thing.

Garrett got even closer to me, though I didn't think that was possible, and that was when he went for it. He brought his face close to mine, his lips going to my neck briefly before I turned to look at him.

"What are you doing?" I asked, trying to put some space between us.

He leaned back and gave me a strange look.

"What I thought you wanted me to," Garrett replied. We were both looking at each other like we thought the other was crazy.

"What?"

"You invited me to your house," Garrett said slowly, like he thought I was dumb enough to need a slow explanation. "On a night you would have the house to yourself."

"Okay?" I replied incredulously. "I didn't think you'd want to hang out with my brother and his friend."

Garretts eyes narrowed and his mouth formed a straight line.

"I wouldn't," he said. "But usually when someone you met on a dating app invites you over when they have the house to themselves, it means something."

"We're friends," I told him and he let out a scoff. That was when I knew I had been too dumb this whole time to see past his facade and into his true intentions.

Garrett didn't have time to say anything before Graham and Adam walked through the door. Adam was smiling while Graham had a scowl on his face as he led him into the house.

I got up from the couch, saving myself from my awkward conversation with Garrett.

"He's drunk?" I asked Graham.

"I love you, Row," Adam slurred, walking toward me with his arms open for a hug. That answered my question.

"Oh, no, he's completely sober," Graham sarcastically replied, grabbing Adam by the arm before he reached me. He looked down at Garrett with the same scowl on his face.

"Do you need any help with him?" I asked and Graham brought his attention to me.

His hair had dried from his shower into messy waves on top of his head. I wanted to run my hands through them, pull on them and see if his body would react, if he would make sounds of pleasure or pain.

"No," Graham replied, pulling me away from my fantasy. "I don't want to impose on... whatever this is."

"Just two guys hanging out apparently," Garrett spoked up, earning another scowl from Graham.

"Yep, that's all it is," I replied forcefully, my patience with him wearing thin.

Graham glanced between us, his gaze lingering on me for a moment before he gently pulled Adam away and up the stairs. I watched as they went until I heard a sigh from Garrett and I turned my attention on him just as he stood from the house.

"I'm going to go," he said, placing his wine glass down on the coffee table.

"Yeah. You should."

"I didn't mean to make this weird for you, Rowan," he said. "But I thought you and I were on the same page."

"Really? What about me seemed like I wanted to keep having casual sex with you?"

"The fact that we kept hanging out?" he suggested like I was stupid.

"You said we could be friends."

"You're never just friends with someone you meet on a dating app," he said, walking toward the door and putting his shoes on. "The benefits is always implied."

"You knew I had never done this before," I hissed lowly. "So there's no way you thought that I knew that. You just thought you could sneak your way into my bed."

He let out a laugh, shaking his head at me.

"Don't try and make it sound like I'm some creep, Rowan," he said. "You would've kept having sex with me if you weren't hung up on some other guy. I didn't know it before but I see it now."

"What the hell are you even talking about?"

"Don't think I didn't notice you eye fucking Graham as soon as he walked in," Garrett retorted. "I noticed it at the shop too. You're not subtle."

I was too shocked at his words to even respond to that. If he was noticing the way I looked at Graham, then anybody else could be too.

"Well, I'll go and I assume we won't be seeing each other anymore," Garrett said, not noticing my shock. "I hope you get to fuck him. It was nice not fucking you, I guess."

" *Get out* ," Graham's voice boomed from the stairs.

Garrett smirked over at Graham then at me before he opened the door and left. I didn't leave the doorway until Garrett's car was out of sight. That was when I felt Graham's presence beside me.

"I told you he was a douchebag," Graham said, his arms crossed over his chest.

I rolled my eyes and pushed him out of my way so I could get to the kitchen.

I started furiously scrubbing the plates we used, getting out my frustrations. A few moments later, Graham brought in the wine glasses from the living room and placed them on the counter beside me.

It wasn't until I was done with the dishes and turned to grab one of the glasses that I realized Graham was still standing there, watching me.

"Is there a reason you're standing there staring at me?" I asked, bringing one of the glasses under the running water.

"He's an asshole," was all Graham said.

I rolled my eyes at him again. "Yes, Graham, I'm well aware of your opinion of him."

I was holding the glass so hard it was on the verge of breaking. Graham must have noticed the strain in my arm and in my back because he walked over and put his hand over mine, causing me to loosen my grip. My gaze immediately shot to him to find him already looking down at me.

"He was never going to be good enough for you," Graham said. "Not as a friend or anything else."

It was hard for me to find my words with him looking at me the way he was, but somehow I managed it.

"I don't even really care about that," I admitted. "I just thought we were on the same page and we weren't. I'm not going to miss him or anything."

I was more upset over the fact that I was back where I started before all this, with no friends and feeling lonely. There was no way I could say that to Graham though. If I got too vulnerable, he would clam up and leave.

Graham's hand was still on mine over the wine glass. I was glad our hands were under the running water, otherwise he would feel my hands get clammy at his touch.

I didn't know how long we stood in the kitchen, Graham's hand over mine, staring at each other with intense gazes, but eventually Graham's eyes left mine and went to our hands. It was like he suddenly realized what he was doing before he abruptly pulled his hand away from mine, splashing the counter in the process.

"Goodnight," he muttered, wiping his hand on his jeans as he left the kitchen.

My grip tightened on the wine glass again and I did my best to take my mind off the way my skin felt after being touched by Graham's.

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Thanks for reading! Leave your thoughts.

12

Rowan Warner

Graham was being weird with me again, only this time, it was a different type of weird. He would talk to me and look at me just fine, but he would never come close to me. He took a wide berth around me if he had to walk by, and the one time we were close enough to almost touch, he jumped out of the way faster than I could blink.

I would never pretend to understand him.

Even now, when he was helping me babysit Jeremy and Julia, my niece and nephew, for the afternoon. Camilla and Jared had to go to some dinner an hour away with people from Jared's work and Mom was feeling sick and didn't want to give anything to the kids, so Camilla had dropped them off with me.

Graham had gotten home from work and Jeremy and Julia instantly ran into his legs, one of them on each as he walked. He hadn't even asked if I wanted any help, he just stayed. Adam apparently had plans after work, so it was just the two of us with the kids.

We were now out in the backyard. Graham was picking Julia up and throwing her, causing a fit of giggles as she came back down into his arm. Jeremy was with me on the patio, playing with a toy dinosaur that his parents had sent him over with.

"Uncle Rowan," Jeremy called out, bringing my attention down to him.

"What's up buddy?"

"I'm hungry," he said. "And I have to go to the bathroom."

"Let's go to the bathroom first, then we'll get a a little snack before dinner," I said, standing up from my chair and leading Jeremy inside.

I helped Jeremy with the bathroom and washing his hands, and when we were done, Graham and Julia had come back inside, Julia climbing into Graham's lap on the couch.

"What do you guys want for snacks?" I asked the kids.

"Puffy chips!" Jeremey answered.

The puffy chips were a baby food that came in a can. They were kind of like puffy cheetos only softer and supposedly good for you. They were technically Julia's snacks, but Jeremy still liked them, and I couldn't blame him; they were pretty good for a baby snack. And they were low in calories and wouldn't fill either of them up before dinner.

Jeremy came with me into the kitchen with me to help with the snacks. They each got a little bowl with the chips and Jeremy carried his into the living room by himself, sitting on the floor in front of the coffee table. I handed Julia's to Graham so he could hold the bowl for her while she picked at the food.

"Are you okay with watching them while I make some dinner?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "Sure."

I went to the kitchen and cooked up some pasta and sauce for the kids, knowing there wasn't much else here they would eat. Once it was finished, I put it in bowls, placed them on the table, and called out for Graham and the kids.

When Graham entered the kitchen, he had a kid attached to each leg again. Julia was giggling so much she had to hold on for dear life so she wouldn't topple onto the floor.

"Time for dinner, you two," I told them, lifting Julia up and helping her wash her hands before placing her on the chair. She started picking up pieces of pasta and shoveling them into her mouth almost instantly.

Graham helped Jeremy wash his hands before putting him in a chair next to his sister.

I watched the two kids eat, too paranoid to take my eyes off of them in case they somehow started choking, while Graham helped himself to the food on the stove.

"Is Adam coming home any time soon?" I asked him, my attention still on the kids. "I made enough."

"Probably not," Graham replied, sitting down at the table. "He's out."

"Without you?"

"I don't usually go with him to his hookups," Graham replied, and that caused my eyes to shoot over to him. I let the shock subside for a moment to send him a glare.

"Watch your mouth! There are little ears."

Graham huffed, looking down at his food. "They have no idea what that means."

"But then they're going to start saying that around their parents and *I'm* going to be the one in trouble for it."

"They're not even paying attention."

I brought my gaze back to Jeremy and Julia, and of course, Graham was right. The two of them were to preoccupied with their food to care about what we were saying.

I left the kids with Graham in the kitchen as they all finished their dinner to set up the kids' sleeping bags in the living room. I was too anxious to have them sleep upstairs in my room, afraid one of them would wake up in the middle of the night without me realizing and fall down the stairs or something, so I would sleep on the couch downstairs with them.

It was still early for them to go to sleep, and I had promised them they could watch a movie, so I turned on the TV and looked through for some options. A few minutes later, I went back to the kitchen to see Graham wiping Julia's face with a wet cloth while Jeremy stood on his tip toes to toss his bowl in the sink.

"Thank you, Jeremy," I said, patting him on the head. "Want to go get in your jammies so we can watch a movie before bed?"

"Yeah!" he exclaimed with a jump before running into the living room.

"All clean," Graham said to Julia, lifting her up as he placed the cloth next to the sink. He held her in one arm, her little arms wrapped around his neck.

"Do you want to watch a movie with us?" I asked Graham, leaning back against the counter. "I mean, they'll probably fall asleep before we finish it and it'll be a kid movie, so..."

I didn't know why I was asking. Surely, Graham had enough of watching the kids and would want some alone time now. And he probably wouldn't want to watch some cartoon, but I felt compelled to ask anyway.

"Sure, I'll watch," he said with a shrug, walking out of the kitchen and into the living room, Julia still in his arm.

I followed them out just in time to see Graham drop Julia on the couch, sending her into a fit of giggles as she bounced on the cushion. He laughed along with her, his smile showing in his eyes.

"Time to get your jammies on, kid," he told her, motioning toward Jeremy who was already changed and sitting in his sleeping bag.

I pulled her pajamas out of her overnight bag and sat on the couch next to her, helping her change into them. Then she sat on the middle cushion next to Graham and I sat on the other side of her. Jeremy requested one of the movies displayed on screen, so I selected it.

Julia lasted longer than I thought she would. She leaned against Graham's side, his arm around her, but she fell asleep about half way through the movie. Jeremy lasted through almost the whole thing, but fell asleep with about twenty minutes left.

Graham didn't move from his seat or say anything about stopping the movie, so I left it on.

Sitting on the couch with Graham, Julia between us, felt oddly domestic. It was never something I expected to do with him, especially with how weird he had been around me lately.

When the movie ended, Graham picked Julia up and gently put her in her sleeping bag. I shut off the TV and quietly walked into the kitchen to do the dishes. I hadn't realized Graham followed me until he stood so close to me by the sink, I felt his presence.

"You're good with them," Graham said quietly.

I let out a small laugh. "They're easy kids to take care of. You're really good with them too. Julia loves you."

Graham shrugged before crossing his arms over his chest and leaning back against the counter next to me.

"Thanks for helping me out with them," I added as I scrubbed a bowl. "You didn't have to do that."

"I wanted to," he replied. "I love those kids."

I nodded, keeping my eyes down at the sink.

"I know I've been acting weird around you again," Graham suddenly said. That caused me to look at him. I was surprised he was even bringing it up.

"I've noticed," I replied, shutting the sink off and drying my hands so I could turn to him fully.

"I'm going to stop with that," he said. "I just... I don't want you to be uncomfortable or feel bad because of how I act."

I wouldn't even ask him why he started acting that way around me. I had a feeling if I did, he wouldn't be truthful about it, and I already knew I probably wouldn't be able to understand Graham or his reasons.

"Okay," I said. "You know, you can just tell me if I do something that bothers you. You don't have to be weird about it."

He let out a short laugh. "No, I can't. It's not you anyway."

That just left me more confused.

"Do you think the kids will be okay in the living room?" he asked. He was good at changing the subject and derailing my thoughts. I had a feeling he did that when he was uncomfortable.

"I'm going to stay in the living room with them," I told him. "I don't want them to wake up scared or something because they forgot where they were."

"Oh," was all Graham said.

We were silent for a moment before he spoke again.

"You really think of everything, don't you?" he asked.

"More like I'm extremely paranoid about something bad happening to them while they're my responsibility," I responded with a light chuckle. "I don't know how parents do it. I'm this stressed out just having them for a night."

"I assume you just get used to it," Graham said. "After a while you realize kids get hurt, get scared, get upset, and it's not the end of the world. Most of the time."

"You're probably right," I agreed. "By the time I'm a parent, I will have hopefully become less paranoid."

"You want kids?"

I hadn't even realized I'd said that or how it would sound. I *did* want kids. For a while, I wanted them with Brendan, back when I thought he would change and the two of us would have a future together.

"I mean, yeah, that's always been the plan," I awkwardly replied, looking away from him. "When I had a boyfriend I thought would be long term, but that's kinda gone to shit now."

"It's a good thing it did," Graham replied in a serious tone. "I mean, obviously how it happened isn't good, but you wouldn't want to stay with that jackass forever or have kids with him."

"Yeah, I know," I said, bringing my eyes back to his. "I'm just mad I wasted so much time with him. Now I have to start all over, go on dates with people, find someone I actually want to be with."

I didn't know why I was saying all this. I just felt like I could, like Graham wanted to listen to me.

"You're twenty-two, you still have a ton of time to date around and find the right guy," Graham assured me. "And it's not that Garrett guy."

I laughed loudly at that, grinning over at Graham.

"Yeah, I figured that one out."

Graham paused, biting on his bottom lip.

"I guess... I guess that's why I was being kind of weird with you," he said.

"Because of Garrett?"

"Because of what he said."

Oh, right. The lovely things he said about me "eye fucking" Graham and him hoping I get to fuck him. Of course, Graham had heard that because why wouldn't he have. The universe hated me and wanted me to be embarrassed always.

"He doesn't know what he's talking about," I rushed out, trying to play it off like those words hadn't had any truth to them. "He was just mad I didn't want to have sex with him and made up an excuse about why."

"No, yeah, I know that," Graham quickly agreed. "I just... if Adam heard..." He let out a sigh. "No, just forget that. I'm sorry. I shouldn't act that way with you."

It bothered me that he cared so much about what Adam thought, but I understood why. He didn't want something like this coming between the two of them because Adam was one of the most important people to him in the world. And I was just his brother that Graham had no attraction to. It wasn't worth them fighting over.

"Well, you can stop," I said. "I don't think Adam heard and if he did, he was too drunk to remember anything anyway."

Graham nodded. "You're right. And I'm sorry things went south with Garrett. I know you wanted to be friends, but you don't deserve to get treated like that."

I smiled over at him. "Thanks Graham. I'll be okay."

**

Thanks for reading!

13

Rowan Warner

These kids woke up at the crack of dawn, then woke me up by jumping on me. They were climbing all over me on the couch when Adam walked in, his hair messed up and darkness under his eyes like he hadn't slept.

"Uncle Adam!" the kids exclaimed in unison, jumping off of me to run to him.

"The walk of shame," I said as he hugged the kids, wincing at their loud screeches of excitement.

"Shut your mouth," he said, glaring at me.

"What, did you get kicked out this morning?" I snickered.

Adam didn't answer, leaving the kids downstairs with me while he went up to his room. He didn't even greet Graham as they passed each other on the stairs.

"I can't tell if he had a really good night or a really bad night," Graham said, picking both Jeremy and Julia up when they rushed over to hug him.

"Me neither," I replied, sitting up on the couch.

"Can we have pancakes for breakfast Uncle Rowan, please?" Jeremy asked, throwing himself backwards in Graham's arms to look at me.

"I'll make breakfast," Graham said, setting the kids down. I stood up from the couch and glanced at him with a suspicious look.

"Are you sure?" I asked him, my eyebrows raised. I wasn't sure Graham knew how to cook *anything* , even something as simple as pancakes.

"Yes, Rowan, I'm not completely useless in the kitchen."

"Okay..."

Graham left the three of us in the living room watching cartoons while he cooked breakfast. During that time, I had to help both kids go to the bathroom twice each, stop them from fighting over one of the couch pillows, stop Julia from crying because Jeremy hit her with said pillow, and scold Jeremy for doing it. It was an eventful twenty minutes with two toddlers, but luckily Graham called us into the kitchen and the kids were happy.

I cut up the pancakes into small pieces for Julia. Jeremy could handle them in bigger pieces. As I was doing that, Graham continued by the stove, making our breakfast. A moment later, he placed a cup of coffee in front of me.

"I don't know how you take it," he said.

"Can you get my caramel creamer from the fridge?" I asked. "It's in the door."

Graham did as I asked and then poured the creamer into my cup.

"That good?" he asked.

I nodded, suddenly not able to find words. This whole situation seemed so domestic, and if I thought any more about that, I would be too far gone and start falling for Graham. He was just being nice, nicer than he had ever been to me, but still just nice. And that was all it took to get me sweating and wishing the kids and Adam were gone so I could take Graham up to my bedroom.

Then, he smiled down at me as he put the cap back on the bottle, and I realized I already had a thing for Graham. And there was nothing I could do about it now. It was too late.

This was *not good* . It was horrible. I needed to get out of this house before I acted on my feelings and ruined everything.

Adam came into the kitchen a few moments later and that instantly stopped all thoughts I had of Graham running through my head.

He walked over to Graham by the stove and looked over his shoulder at the pan.

"Is this one mine?" Adam asked, earning a glare from his friend.

"It's Rowan's. You're at the back of the line," Graham replied.

"It's fine," I said, causing both of them to look back at me. "Make sure we get all three kids fed first."

Graham laughed at that while Adam scowled at me and took a seat at the table.

"Uncle Rowan, I have to go to the bathroom," Jeremy said, setting down his now empty cup of milk.

"Uncle Adam will bring you," I said, glancing at Adam who had his head resting on the table.

"Uncle Adam is sleeping," Adam said and I nudged him with my foot.

"Go bring him to the bathroom," I hissed. "He does it himself mostly, you just have to stand outside in case he needs you. And he needs help reaching the sink."

Adam picked his head up and discretely flipped me off before standing from the table.

"Let's go little buddy," he said, holding out his hand for Jeremy to take.

Adam left the kitchen with Jeremy just as Graham put down a plate with pancakes in front of me.

"Are these pancakes good, Julia?" I asked her as she shoveled pieced into her mouth.

"Yummy," Julia said with a mouthful.

"I promise they're edible," Graham told me.

"I've just never seen you cook before," I replied. "I'm skeptical."

"Making pancakes is hardly cooking," he said, pouring more batter into the pan.

We finished up breakfast and I got the kids changed and ready for their parents to pick them up while Graham cleaned up in the kitchen and Adam sat in there and watched him. It was only a few minutes later when Camilla and Jared came in the kids ran excitedly to their parents.

"I hope they weren't any trouble for their Uncle Rowan," Camilla said as she picked Julia up, looking over at me.

"They were perfect angels," I told her. Except for this morning, but they didn't need to know that. What was the fun in going to your uncle's if he told on you for every little thing?

"I doubt that," Jared said with a laugh. "Or they're just better for you than they are for us."

"Angels," I repeated.

Graham and Adam walked into the living room, and Camilla let out a snort when she saw our brother.

"Looks like Uncle Adam had a rough night!" she said with a grin.

"Uncle Rowan said he got kicked out," Jeremy said, causing Camilla and Jared to laugh loudly and Adam to narrow his eyes at me.

"I see," Camilla said, still laughing. "Did you two eat?"

"Uncle Graham made pancakes," Jeremy told her.

"How nice. I hope you thanked him."

Jeremy ran over to Graham and hugged his legs.

"Oh, Rowan," Jared called out, gaining my attention. "I wanted to tell you, one of my buddies owns an apartment building and one of his units is vacant and he hasn't put it up for rent yet. We can go look at it today and it's yours if you want it."

"Really?" I asked, starting to pick up the kid's bags. "He would just let me have it?"

"I put in a word for you," Jared said. "Told him you're my brother-in-law, and he said if you want it, it's yours. Saves him the trouble of having to look for tenants."

"I'll go look at it," I said. This seemed too good to be true. It would be the perfect timing now that I knew the feelings I had for Graham were getting out of hand.

"Sweet," he said. "I can come pick you up this afternoon if you're free."

"Yeah, definitely."

"Well, thank you for taking the kids for the night, Rowan," Camilla said, putting one arm around me in a hug while Julia stayed in her other arm.

After Camilla and Jared left with the kids, Adam walked over to me.

"What was Jared saying about an apartment?" he asked.

"His friend has one I can rent if I like it," I told him, glancing behind him at Graham who now wore an unreadable expression. "So, you might finally be rid of me."

"I hope you like it then," Adam said before turning around and walking upstairs.

Graham and I stood in silence for a few moments, and I had a feeling that he wasn't happy with the fact that I could be moving out.

"I know you really want a third person for the rent," I started, causing Graham to finally bring his eyes to mine. "And if this apartment works out for me, I'll help you find a new one. Promise."

He let out a long sigh. "Okay."

And then he turned and walked up the stairs.

Despite Graham's cold attitude toward the prospect of me leaving, I was excited that I might finally be able to live on my own, in a place that could feel like home. That was all I wanted, a place I would be comfortable in and could call my own. One that I could decorate to my heart's desire and light candles without getting yelled at.

Later on in the day, Jared picked me up from the house and the two of us went across town to the apartment building.

"I don't know what it looks like," Jared warned. "So, if it looks like shit, don't blame me. I'll let him down easy."

"I'm sure it doesn't look like shit," I assured him.

"And if you don't end up wanting it, just tell me," he continued. "I'm not trying to force you into this apartment just because the landlord is my friend. I just know you want out of Adam's."

"Adam's isn't actually that bad," I admitted. "It was rough at the start, but it's gotten a lot better."

"Well, good," Jared replied, pulling into the driveway.

His friend, Don, was outside waiting for us already. He introduced himself and brought us up to the vacant third floor apartment.

"There's still some work I have to do to it to fix it up from the last tenant," Don said as he opened the door. "It'll have new carpets and I'll repaint the

walls and check for any other repairs."

The apartment was quaint, smaller than I would have liked, but not small enough that I immediately didn't want it. The door entered into the kitchen, then through an arched doorway was the living room, and the two doors behind the living room were the bedroom and the bathroom.

"Is there an in-unit washer and dryer?" I asked.

"Yeah, it's in the basement," Don replied. "Each tenant has their own, so you wouldn't have to worry about sharing."

"How are the neighbors?" Jared asked. He seemed to be inspecting this apartment just as much as I was. He was glancing around at everything as if trying to find something wrong or needing repair.

"They're quiet," Don said. "First floor is an old couple, second floor is a couple around your age, no screaming kids or anything."

Don showed us through the rest of the apartment, and I couldn't help but feel like something was missing. I didn't get any feeling that told me this place was right for me. It was further from work and my parents' house, it was on a busy street with lots of traffic, and there wasn't a lot of space in here.

But it would be mine, and that mattered most to me.

"What's the rent?" Jared asked.

"$2200 a month," Don answered.

Jared and I shared a look. This place was nowhere near worth *that* much. I paid less splitting rent with Adam and Graham at the house.

"That seems like a lot," Jared said, bringing his gaze back to Don. I wasn't going to say anything about that, but Jared wasn't afraid to speak up.

"Utilities included," Don added. "Except for electricity. But water and heat are included."

Jared and I shared another look. We let Don go on a spiel about why it was a good price for the apartment. It was in a good location, he said. There was in-unit washer and dryer, he said. But to me, that wasn't enough, and I left slightly disappointed.

"So, it was kinda shitty right?" Jared asked me as he pulled away. "Like, I wasn't alone in thinking that."

"It wasn't *that* shitty," I replied with a sigh. "It's just small and way too expensive for what it is. I can stay in Adam's house and pay less than that splitting with the two of them."

"I'm sorry," Jared said. "I totally thought it'd be like $1,000 or something."

"It's okay," I said. "I'm just not going to take it. That's not what I want to be spending my money on."

I made pretty good money, but with my car loan and student loans, I already had so much to pay for every month. If I was going to be paying that kind of money for something, I wanted it to be for something I loved, not something I was settling for just to get out of Adam's.

"I'll tell him you're thinking about it and looking at other options," Jared told me. "Then, I'll say you found something else."

"Thanks, Jared."

When Jared dropped me off at home, Adam's car was gone from the driveway. I walked in expecting the house to be empty, thinking Graham had gone with Adam wherever he was, but he was sitting on the couch when I entered. He didn't even look at me when I walked in.

"What's up?" I asked, kicking off my shoes.

Graham shrugged but didn't say anything. I stood there and stared at him for a moment, trying to decide if I was catching weird vibes from him. Sometimes Graham was just quiet, but this felt different.

"Did you have dinner?" I asked. He shook his head. "Wanna order something? I don't feel like cooking."

He just shrugged again and now I was officially annoyed. I stomped over to the TV and stood in front of it, hoping to get a reaction out of him, but I got nothing. Graham looked as if he was staring right through me.

"What is your deal?" I asked him, crossing my arms over my chest in annoyance. "I'm not even worthy of a response?"

His eyes flicked up to my face, and for some reason, that made me snap.

"You know what? Fine, I'll order dinner just for myself," I snapped, starting to stomp toward the stairs.

"Going up to pack?" Graham asked, his tone almost accusatory.

I turned slowly to face him. "Is that what this is about? That I'm moving out? I told you I'd help you find a new roommate!"

He didn't say anything. He didn't even look at me.

I walked back over to the couch, picked up the remote, and shut the TV off. That caused Graham to look at me.

"You can't be serious," I said, glaring down at him as I stood in front of his spot on the couch. "You knew this was temporary when you let me move in here!"

I didn't even want to tell him that I wasn't taking the apartment because he had just assumed I would take the first thing that fell into my lap and decided he would be mad at me for it.

"I said I'd help you find someone else to move in to pay a third," I added. "I don't know why you're mad at me."

"It's not about the rent," Graham replied. The two of us glared at each other. Graham stood up from the couch and now it was him who was looking down at me.

"Then what the hell could it possibly be about!" I exclaimed, despite how close we were standing. Our chests were almost touching. "This is why I need to get out of here! You and Adam drive me insane!"

"Then I'm glad you found a place," he said with a frown, his tone low and filled with anger.

"Just tell me why you're mad!" I yelled. "It makes no sense! You always do this, you get weird with me or get mad when you're uncomfortable, and *I'm* the one that has to deal with your shit because of how *you* feel. You and Adam are *infuriating* and I—"

I was cut off by Graham grabbing my face and pulling it up to his, capturing my lips in a kiss. It was a short kiss, just one to shut me up, and it worked. He pulled away, my face still cupped in his hands.

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice low and raspy. I didn't know what part he was apologizing for. "I shouldn't have done that. That was out of line. I'm sorry —"

"Don't be," I said, bring my lips back to his.

This kiss was longer, more sensual and lasting. Graham brought his hands down so that one cupped my jaw and the other held the side of my neck. My hands reached out and grabbed his waist, pulling him closer to me.

Our lips moved slowly, as if trying to memorize every inch of the other's. My tongue poked out and met Graham's as the kiss became more intense, and all thoughts in my head escaped me. The way he kissed sent chills down my spine. He teased me with his tongue, opened his mouth for me then closed it so only our lips touched.

He pulled his lips from mine and started kissing up my jaw. I groaned at the feeling. Every touch of his lips on my skin was like a shock and energy pulsed through me. I threw my head back, my eyes closed and my hands gripping his waist as he continued.

Graham took his lips from my neck, but neither of us let go of our hold on the other. I opened my eyes to see him looking down at me, dazed with eyes filled with lust.

"Was that your way of telling me to shut up?" I asked him breathlessly.

Graham laughed and let go of me. Although I didn't want to, I released him too.

"Sort of," he replied. "It was my way of telling you a lot of things."

"Like what?"

"Like, I don't want you to move out and it's never been about the rent," Graham admitted, his voice barely a whisper. "And I'm attracted to you. And I'm sorry for making you angry."

"If you had just *asked* about the apartment, I would have told you that I wasn't planning on taking it," I told him. "But now I'm sort of glad you didn't."

"Just sort of?" he asked, scratching the back of his neck. "Now I feel stupid."

I laughed and pulled his face down to mine for a brief kiss.

"You were being stupid, but it's okay, it worked out."

He pecked my lips again then asked, "So, wanna order dinner?"

**

Thanks for reading leave your thoughts:)

14

Rowan Warner

It turned out that it was actually quite hard trying to secretly make out with Graham while living in the same house as Adam. Every time we heard even the faintest of noises, the two of us sprung apart like we were caught doing something illegal. Graham had been adamant from the start that Adam was *not* to find out about us, and I didn't blame him.

I didn't want to deal with Adam finding out about the two of us either, even though we were both adults who could do whatever we wanted with whoever we wanted. Adam would be a baby about it if he found out, there was no doubt in my mind, so it was always easier to find time with each other when Adam left the house.

The two of us went up to my bedroom as soon as Adam went out on Friday night.

Graham and I were in my bed, him hovering over me as I was lying down on my back. My hands were sneaking up his shirt, running up and down his toned stomach, while one of his hands held himself up and the other went to the front of my jeans, sliding inside, stroking me.

"Oh, fuck," I moaned against his lips.

"Does that feel good?" His voice was rough and raspy, filled with lust.

"God, *yes* ."

Graham's hand continued moving over me and I shuddered under his touch. He was hypnotizing and intoxicating. He moved like he knew exactly what my body wanted from him, like he had done this plenty of times before.

I couldn't focus on anything other than his hand. My kiss became sloppy, but Graham didn't seem to mind. He kept kissing me even as I moaned

beneath him, leaving my mouth open for him.

Graham kept going until I finished with a loud groan. He kissed my neck as I breathed heavily for a few moments, then he let me turn us over so that I was above him. I brought my mouth down and kissed him through the front of his jeans before pulling them off. Graham dug his hands into my hair as I put my mouth on him, lightly pulling it to move me at the pace he wanted to go.

When he finished, I moved up beside him and sat back against the headboard. Graham breathed heavily and tilted his head to the side to gaze at me, his eyes glossy and looking at me like I had just given him the world.

"You're good at that," Graham said with a smirk, eliciting a loud laugh from me.

The smile stayed on my face as I joked, "I might have done it once or twice before."

I laughed at Graham again as his expression soured at my words.

"I don't want to think about that," he said. His lips were turned up slightly in a close-lipped smile, and the two of us sat in my bed staring at each other with matching expressions.

It was like now that we had confessed our attraction to the other, there was this unspoken connection between us when we were alone. It wasn't just casual between us, though we hadn't placed a label on it. Graham was new and exciting to me, and I didn't have to worry about him hurting me or using me. The two of us could just *be* . There didn't have to be anything else to it.

I filed my fingers through my hair, pulling through the knots caused by Graham's hold on me. He watched as I did it, looking at me like he was afraid of missing out on something if he looked away.

Graham reached over and pushed my hair back off my forehead, his hand slowly trailing down the side of my face, then going back to his side.

We gazed at each other in silence until I cleared my throat and spoke up.

"Do you, uh, want me to cook dinner?" I asked.

Graham seemed to come back to his senses and looked more like the Graham I was used to, the one with the neutral expressions that reminded me of just how long I had known him.

"If you want," Graham said with his usual shrug. "Or we can order out." Graham stood up from the bed and arched his back, stretching out.

"I don't know," I replied. "We just ordered out."

He looked at me like I was crazy. "Yeah, last weekend."

"I'm just used to cooking, I guess," I said, standing up from the bed.

When I was with Brendan, he wanted me to cook every night. At the time he had told me he just loved my cooking and wanted it all the time, but now I started to realize it was more about control. He wanted me at home every night, cooking him meals, and cleaning up after him. And if I wasn't at home cooking for him, I was out with him and his friends. I didn't have my own friends and didn't have time to myself.

"Let's order something," I decided. After thinking about Brendan, I didn't want to cook at all.

"Cool," Graham replied, pulling out his phone. "Where do you want me to order from?"

"Um, I don't know," I sheepishly replied.

Graham looked up at me, a strange expression on his face, then his eyes lingered behind me for a moment.

"Are you ever going to get a bookshelf?" he asked. I turned around to look at the piles of books stacked in the corner of my bedroom.

"Probably not until I move out," I said. Graham pressed his lips together in a straight line and looked back down at his phone, nodding.

"Want Chinese?"

"Sure."

Graham and I went downstairs and sat down on the couch together so I could look at the menu on his phone. I sat close to him, looking over his shoulder at the screen. He told me all his favorite meals from the restaurant and what he thought I would like. Then once we decided, Graham ordered the food for delivery.

"You know next weekend is your dad's work cookout," Graham told me.

The work cookout was something Dad did every year in the summer. He invited all his employees and their families over to the house and made a ton of food for everyone. It was his way of showing some appreciation for his workers, and also showing he had some interest in their lives outside of work. He always wanted all of his kids present, even the ones that didn't work at the shop.

"I forgot about that," I said, lying back on the couch and putting my legs in Graham's lap.

"I figured," Graham replied, placing a hand on the top of my calf.

"Why are you bringing it up?"

"Wanted to see if you planned on going."

"I don't think I have a choice." Mom wouldn't let me bail on the family cookout earlier in the summer and Dad wouldn't let me bail on the work cookout. "Dad always wants us all there."

Graham nodded, moving his hand up and down my leg.

"You can come with Adam and me," Graham offered.

"Is this you asking me to be designated driver?" I asked with a grin. "Do I get to drive the truck?"

Graham scoffed. "No, you don't get to drive the truck. I just thought maybe you didn't want to go by yourself."

"I'll go with you guys if Adam doesn't throw a fit about it."

"Who cares if he does."

It would be more of an annoyance than anything, but that didn't mean I wanted to deal with Adam's immaturity.

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Saturday morning, I got up early with the intention of going grocery shopping. What I didn't expect was for Graham to already be awake and making breakfast, then offering to go to the store with me.

We took my car after a slight argument about who would drive. I'd argued that the truck really had no room for groceries and I wasn't going to put our food in the bed. Graham eventually relented and got into the passenger's seat of my car. Part of me thought he would want to drive, but I didn't argue when he got into the passenger's seat and fiddled with the radio as I drove.

"Have you ever actually been grocery shopping?" I asked him as we walked through the produce section.

"Well, yeah," he replied.

"Like real grocery shopping for real food?"

" *Yes."*

It didn't seem like it to me. All he and Adam seemed to have in their cabinets before I moved in was protein powder and cereal boxes.

I started picking out some vegetables while Graham followed me with the cart. I was picking through the apples when I heard someone call out my

name.

"Rowan?"

I turned around to see one of my old friends, Gwen. She was a shared friend with Brendan, another one I lost in the aftermath of the breakup.

"Hey, Gwen," I said awkwardly, glancing at Graham with a panicked expression before looking at Gwen with a fake smile plastered on my face.

Gwen looked between Graham and me, presumably trying to figure out what was going on between us. She would no doubt run to Brendan and tell him I was with someone new. She wouldn't be entirely wrong, but she would definitely exaggerate the situation. Gwen was always one that loved drama.

"Who's this?" Gwen asked in an almost accusing tone. It was like she thought she caught me in the act of cheating only I was single and it was none of her business.

"This is my roommate, Graham," I introduced. "Graham, this is Gwen."

"Roommate?" Gwen asked with a snort, raising her eyebrows like she didn't believe me.

"Yeah, he's Adam's friend."

"You moved in with Adam?"

I didn't want to answer that. Brendan knew where Adam and Graham lived, and I didn't want him knowing where I was staying. It was a mistake to tell Gwen that Graham was Adam's friend, but there was no taking that back now. I just had to hope she wouldn't mention it, though I knew that was wishful thinking.

I ignored her question and changed the subject.

"So, what's new?" I asked.

"Been helping Brendan move out of the apartment," she said.

She was just trying to make me feel guilty because now that he didn't have my income helping him with the rent, he couldn't afford it on his own. That was part of the reason I stayed with him for so long in the first place. Neither of us could afford our place on our own.

"Oh, he's moving?"

"Well, yeah," Gwen replied in a snarky tone. "That reminds me, do you want that bookshelf or can we sell it?"

"You can-"

"He wants it," Graham cut in. "I can pick it up in my truck."

I looked at him with wide eyes, silently asking him what hell he was doing.

"No, it's fine," I quickly said. "I don't need it."

"We'll take it," Graham insisted.

"Okay, which is it?" Gwen asked, looking annoyed.

"We'll take it," Graham repeated with finality in his tone.

I stared at him, shocked.

Gwen nodded and walked away from us.

"I don't need the bookshelf," I told him, throwing some apples into my mesh produce bag.

"I can go get it," Graham said. "It's not a big deal."

"I don't want it."

"Well, then you can sell it. Why should Brendan be able to sell your things?"

I didn't know why I was so worked up over this. The bookshelf really didn't matter, but I wanted nothing to do with Brendan. I was willing to give up some things (not my kitchen appliances) to break free from him. Leaving the bookshelf wasn't that big of a deal but going back for it after the fact felt strange. And I didn't want Graham having to deal with Brendan.

"I just really feel like it doesn't matter," I told Graham. "And I don't want to have to see Brendan."

"Well, obviously, I'm not taking you with me to go get it," Graham answered, following me as I walked out of the produce section.

"I don't want you to have to see Brendan either."

Graham just shrugged and that was the last of the conversation for the moment.

I was all stressed out from seeing Gwen that as soon as we got home, we put all the groceries away and I immediately started cooking.

To his credit, Graham did offer to help, and at any other time I would let him, but I needed to let out my stress and this was the only way I knew how. He sat at the kitchen table and watched me as I cooked, looking as if he was afraid to say something.

"Are you angry with me?" Graham asked as I put the dish in the oven and started cleaning up.

"No, I'm not angry," I said, though my voice sort of made me sound like I was. It was snapping and sharp, but that was more from my stress about the situation than it was anything about me being angry with Graham.

"I just don't think you should let him sell your things," Graham said, standing up from the kitchen table to stand behind me. "That's just allowing him to continue taking from you. But if you really don't want me to get the shelf, I won't."

Graham put his arms around my waist from behind as I wiped down the counter, and I nearly melted into him. It felt good to have someone care about me like this, to have someone hold me. With Brendan, something like this only came after a fight or physical altercation. It was always an apology, never purely affection.

I tried not to think about how this thing between us could turn sour. I never expected it with Brendan before the first time he had hurt me. It blindsided me. I didn't want to be blindsided like that ever again.

Graham was always kind and soft. I just had to focus on that.

"If it's important to you, then you can go get the shelf," I said with a sigh.

"It is."

"Okay."

Graham kissed the back of my neck, tightening his arms around my waist.

Then the front door opened and closed, and Graham jumped halfway across the kitchen.

"What are you guys doing?" Adam asked as he walked in.

" *I'm* cooking. Graham is waiting to eat," I said, looking over at Graham who had a look of bewilderment. He quickly eased up his expression when Adam looked at him.

"Are you cooking something I like?" Adam asked me as if I didn't always cook something Adam liked.

"Yes, Adam."

"You could sound a little more grateful, Adam," Graham chastised his friend. "Rowan's always cooking for us. Show a little appreciation."

Adam rolled his eyes. "Whatever. Call me when it's done."

Graham shook his head as Adam left the room and the two of us shared a look. I burst out laughing, which caused Graham to soften his expression and smile over at me.

"He's like a kid," I said as I continued cooking.

Graham sighed, leaning back against the counter. "I wish he wasn't so rude to you."

I wished that too, but it didn't bother me as much now that I felt like I finally had someone on my side in this household.

Having Graham here with me, I didn't feel so alone.

**

Thanks for reading ! Leave your thoughts.

15

Rowan Warner

I sat in the middle seat of Graham's truck between him and Adam on the way to my parents' house the day of Dad's work cookout. Graham had assured me that there would be plenty of room for the three of us to sit in the truck, but he clearly underestimated how much space the three of us would take up.

I tried to sit as close as I could to Adam because I knew if I sat closer to Graham in front of Adam, Graham would be tense the whole time. Adam clearly didn't like this situation any more than I did. He glared at me when I leaned into him as Graham took a sharp turn.

"You've *got* to scooch over," Adam complained. I moved over slightly to appease him.

"I really don't have that much room," I said.

"You could have taken your own car."

I rolled my eyes. "Shut up. Your friend was nice enough to offer a ride. Why would I refuse if we're all going to the same place?"

"It's also more environmentally friendly this way," Graham added.

Adam had nothing to say to that, so the three of us were silent for the rest of the ride to the house. Graham ignored our argument and kept his eyes on the road.

There were already cars parked outside when we got to the house. Graham parked in the driveway like usual, and as soon as the car was stopped, Adam was out and making his way to the backyard.

"What's his issue?" I asked as Graham shut the car of. "It can't just be that I rode here with you guys."

He shrugged. "I have no idea. You know how he gets sometimes."

Graham and I got out of the truck, and he took a moment while no one was around to wrap an arm around my waist and give me a brief kiss. He pulled away with a squeeze of my hip and made his way to the back yard.

I watched him as he went for a moment, admiring the view, before I followed after him.

Dad was already cooking on the grill, talking to one of the older men that started working at his shop this year. He waved me over when he saw me enter the back yard.

"Bob, this is my son, Rowan," Dad introduced us.

"Another Warner son!" Bob exclaimed with a laugh.

I shot him a friendly smile. "Nice to meet you."

"Your father talks about you all the time," Bob said. "Good things, of course."

I lifted an eyebrow at my father.

"He does?" I asked, surprised.

Dad was never overly affectionate with any of his children, and he rarely handed out praise. But I supposed it was true that he was soft under his rough exterior and spoke fondly of his children.

Dad just grumbled under his breath in response and started talking about something else with Bob. I took that as my cue to leave and went off to find my siblings. The first one my eyes landed on was Cade, and so I made my way over to where he was sitting with another boy around his age.

"Hey," I greeted, sitting down across from him.

Cade looked away from the boy sitting next to him to greet me.

"Hey, can you believe Dad is making me sit out here instead of studying?" Cade asked in an exaggerated tone. "He gets mad that I failed physics and have to do a summer class to go to senior year, I get a tutor and have him over, and now he's making me attend his stupid cookout!"

"Is this your tutor?" I asked, glancing over at the boy next to him. The boy was smaller than Cade, clearly timid, and looking uncomfortable.

"Yeah, this is Miles," Cade replied. "He's some physics genius or something."

"I'm not a genius," Miles muttered, looking down at the table.

"Hey, Rowan, your boyfriend's over there," Cade said with a smirk, pointing behind me.

I looked to where he was pointing and saw Graham, and my heart almost fell into my stomach until I realized Graham was standing with Tim. Cade was talking about Tim. He knew nothing of what was going on with Graham and me.

I turned back to Cade.

"Knock it off," I said, crossing my arms over my chest.

A moment later, a hand came down on my shoulder. I looked up to see Dean smiling down at me. I hadn't talked to Dean much since Graham had told me about Brendan showing up at the shop. I wished Dean had told me about it. Part of me understood why he didn't. He didn't want me to worry or feel embarrassed, but I thought that was something I should know about. I wanted to know if Brendan was around, if there was any possibility he could be looking for me.

"Hey," Dean said. "How are you doing? I haven't heard from you in a bit."

"I'm fine," I said, standing up from my chair. "Can we talk?"

I might as well get this conversation over with. I wanted to tell Dean that I wanted to know about things like that in the future. There was no use having that conversation with Dad or Adam because neither of them would listen to a word I said. Dean, on the other hand, would. The two of us were always close and he always looked out for me. He was the only one I could reason with, and he was the one I expected to tell me these things.

Dean and I walked away from everyone else, to the edge of the yard near the tree line. Dean looked confused, raising his eyebrows at me.

"Everything okay?" he asked.

I let out a breath. "Why didn't you tell me about Brendan showing up to the shop?"

I decided I wouldn't beat around the bush. I hated even talking about Brendan and I wanted this conversation to be over with as soon as possible.

Dean's eyes widened for a moment before he brought his expression into a neutral one.

"How did you hear about that?" he asked.

"Graham," I said. "I'd rather you tell me something like that, not him."

Of course, things were a little different now that I had an entirely different relationship with Graham, but when I found out about this, my relationship with Graham was the same as it had always been. Dean should have told me. And by the look on his face, he knew it.

"I just didn't want to freak you out," Dean said after a moment. "I don't want you to have to think about him any more than you probably already do."

"But I should know if he's still coming around," I argued. "I should know if you guys are having to deal with him and if he's trying to find me."

Dean sighed. "Yeah. You're right. I'm sorry. In my defense, Dad didn't want us telling you about it."

"Dad isn't always right."

"I know."

We were silent for a moment. I didn't want things being awkward between Dean and me. I was closer to him than I was to any of my other siblings. I trusted him and relied on him to keep me in the loop with things. Even if that meant going against whatever our father said.

"Mom doesn't know either," Dean added. "Dad didn't want to worry her."

"He also didn't want her telling me," I pointed out.

"Yeah, I'm sure that had something to do with it," he replied. "Again, I'm sorry. I won't keep something like that from you again, okay?"

"Okay."

The two of us walked back to the yard, and I followed Dean over to where Nora stood with our mother and some other ladies.

"Rowan!" Mom exclaimed, throwing her arms around me. "I didn't even see you come in."

I stood around with Mom for a while as she talked to the other ladies. A few of them were spouses of some of the guys that worked at Dad's shop, but the two female mechanics that worked there were with the group of ladies as well.

Dean eventually got dragged into a came of corn hole with Tim, playing against Adam and Graham which left me watching off to the side with Nora. It felt kind of strange that I stood there with Nora, the both of us watching our significant others, only nobody knew about Graham and me.

I watched as he threw the bean bag, the muscles on his back moving as he swung his arm. I watched as he cheered with Adam, his grin taking up his whole face as the bean bag landed in the hole on the board.

"So," Nora said after a little while of the two of us just watching.

I looked at her and she smirked, looking back and forth between the game in front of us and me.

"What?" I asked.

"Is there a reason you've been staring at Graham this whole time?"

My eyes widened for a fraction of a second. I quickly pulled my expression into a casual one, like her question didn't just send me spiraling.

"I haven't," I lied.

I had to work on not being so obvious or I could kiss this thing with Graham goodbye. He was clear about it being a secret, mostly about it being a secret from Adam. But if I was so obvious that other people were picking up on it so early on, this would end before it even really started. Graham would decide I was more trouble than I was worth.

The expression on Nora's face told me that she didn't believe me. She started laughing and shook her head at me. I didn't know what to do. I could admit it and ask her not to tell anyone, but I still didn't know her that well and she could tell Dean. Or I could just deny it which wouldn't really do much because she clearly had her mind made up about what she saw.

"I get it if you have a crush on him," Nora said while I contemplated in my head. "He's cute. And it's kind of this forbidden thing, right? Your brother's best friend?"

I let out a laugh, relieved that all she thought was going on was that I had a crush. That was harmless. That, I could play along with.

"Living with him may have brought out some... feelings," I admitted. It wasn't really a lie. That was what had happened.

"I can see that," Nora said, nodding. "He seems like a good guy."

"He is," I told her.

The game ended with Adam and Graham winning and Tim convinced they somehow cheated. Tim was complaining and begging for a rematch as they walked away until his eyes landed on me. He stopped and looked around awkwardly.

"Don't drink too much, Tim," Graham warned. "We don't want a repeat of last time you were drunk around Rowan." Tim's face flushed as he followed Dean over to the food.

Graham said it to tease Tim, but I'd be lying if I said part of me didn't hope he said it because he didn't want to see Tim coming onto me again. I hoped that he said it to show some sort of protectiveness in the only way he could without giving us away.

We all went over to the food table to grab something to eat. Tim deliberately kept his eyes off me the whole time. This was also the first time during the day that I saw Charlie and Camilla and their spouses. The kids were running around with the other kids that were there.

Charlie was chuckling to himself as he looked between Tim and me. I glared at him to make him stop.

"Tim's not bothering you, is he?" Charlie asked teasingly.

"Can you leave it alone? He's clearly embarrassed," I said. I sort of felt bad for Tim. It wasn't like he did anything irredeemable, but nobody could let it go.

By the time the cookout came to a close, I was helping out with cleaning up, much to the annoyance of Adam. He was ready to go, but I refused to leave without helping our mother. Graham joined me in taking down one of the tables and bringing it to the garage.

"Adam could help, you know, instead of moping," I said, irritation clear in my voice as we set the table down in the garage.

"Yeah, he could've," Graham suggested, pushing the table up against the wall. "But it's nice to be alone, isn't it?"

He walked over to me and pressed me up against the wall with a smirk on his face.

"It's not like we could do this if Adam was in here helping," Graham added, placing his hands on my hips.

I smiled up at him. "I guess you're right."

Graham lowered his lips onto mine and I instantly responded to his kiss, wrapping my arms around his neck and moving my lips against his.

My irritation at Adam went away as soon as Graham touched me. It was like he could make me forget anything for brief moments as long as he was touching me, kissing me.

He pulled away after a few moments and looked around to make sure we hadn't been caught. Part of me thought he liked the idea of hiding, of the threat of being caught in the act. It was part of what made this special and exciting for him.

"Let's go before someone comes looking for us," he said, squeezing my hips before starting to walk out of the garage.

**

Thanks for reading :)

16

Rowan Warner

Graham liked sleeping in my bed.

Even when he had to sneak out during the early hours of the morning to make sure Adam wouldn't notice him leaving my room, he still enjoyed it. He loved affection and physical touch, and his touch was always so soft and gentle until I didn't want it to be. He would be soft when I wanted and rough when I wanted, and he was easy to communicate with when it came to what each of us desired.

I wasn't used to having so much choice. My relationship with Brendan was all about him. We had sex when Brendan wanted to have sex. It was gentle when he wanted it to be and rough when he wanted it to be. With Graham, it was different. He could read me so well. He knew what I wanted, what I *needed*, and he gave it to me.

I couldn't even complain that he woke me up nearly every morning earlier than either of us needed to be awake so he could sneak back into his room. I'd rather he do that than not spend the night with me at all.

It was better when we knew Adam was gone for the night and we had some time in the morning before he would be back. Then we could wake up and lay in bed tangled together for a while without worrying about being interrupted.

On a Saturday morning after Adam had spent Friday night out, Graham stayed in my bed without the worry of Adam coming home too early. Graham rolled over, pulling me up against him and groaned something incoherent, clearly still half asleep.

I took a moment to admire just how handsome Graham was. The angles of his face were so sharp and masculine. He had a little bit of scruff on his jaw that I liked feeling against my own skin when he was kissing me.

Graham didn't wake up until his phone started ringing on the nightstand. This caused him to spring awake, releasing me as he rolled over and answered the phone without so much as glancing at it.

"Hello?" he answered, sitting up against the headboard.

Graham listened to whoever was on the line and seemed to relax a little as he heard them speak.

"Hi, Mom," he said after a moment. "Nothing. I just woke up."

I lay down on my side, watching Graham as he spoke to his mother. He never talked much about her. All I knew of Graham's mother was the few times I met her and what I'd heard my parents saying about her growing up.

She fought with Graham's dad a lot and the two of them eventually separated. She was also rarely home, having to work multiple jobs after she split from Graham's dad. From what my parents had said, Graham and his mother weren't particularly close and she moved away basically as soon as Graham was eighteen. It was surprising to me that they even spoke on the phone.

"Wow, that's great," Graham spoke into the phone, though his voice didn't sound as enthusiastic as his words. "When?"

I scooted closer to Graham and wrapped my arm around his waist. He rested his free hand on my arm, his thumb moving up and down on my skin.

"Alright, well we'll have to make plans," Graham told her, looking down at me. "Let me know when your plans are settled."

After a few moments, Graham and his mother were saying their goodbyes and hanging up the phone.

Graham closed his eyes, looking up at the ceiling and letting out a long sigh.

"That bad, huh?" I asked in a teasing tone, trying to lighten his mood.

He looked down at me. "It's not so bad, I'm just an ungrateful child."

"How so?"

"My mom wants to visit and I don't even want to see her," he explained, wrapping an arm around me.

"I don't see how that makes you ungrateful."

"Maybe ungrateful is the wrong word," he replied. "But it feels shitty to not want to see my mother who I haven't seen in two years."

"You have your reasons, I'm sure," I assured him.

"Last time she came to 'visit' me I saw her for all of ten minutes," Graham told me. "I think she just feels obligated because I'm her son, but I really wish she wouldn't."

"Do you guys talk often?"

Graham snorted. "No. I think she calls me like twice a year, maybe three times."

That was sad to think about, that a mother and son were so distant. I couldn't imagine not speaking to my mother. I spoke to her more times in a day sometimes than Graham spoke to his all year.

"My mom never wanted to be a mother," Graham explained, squeezing me tighter against him. "She told me that."

I held in a gasp. I was sure a lot of mothers didn't actually want to be mothers, but most of them wouldn't tell their children that.

"My dad knocked her up and love bombed her into believing what she wanted was to get married to him and have his baby," he continued. "Which was obviously not what she actually wanted. So obviously their marriage didn't work out and neither did raising me."

"I'd say you were raised pretty well," I told him with a grin. "Even if you kind of had to raise yourself."

Graham chuckled. "That's the thing though, I didn't really raise myself. Your parents practically did."

That was true to an extent. Graham had been friends with Adam for so long that he really did grow up with us. My parents clearly knew Graham's house wasn't the best place to grow up, so they let him come across the street to ours whenever he needed.

"Your parents parented me more than mine ever did," Graham added. "Your dad gave me and Adam *the talk* together."

I gasped and slapped Graham lightly on the stomach.

"You're lying," I said, though I knew he was certainly telling the truth. That was something my father would do.

"I'm serious," Graham laughed. "It was horrible."

I was sure it was horrible because I endured the same talk from my father, which was before he knew I was gay so some of the information wasn't applicable and that made it even worse. Then I had o endure another *talk* after I came out. Listening to my straight father try to educate me on gay sex was *not* a pleasant experience.

"And then the first time he caught Adam and me smoking weed, he *grounded me* ," Graham said, still laughing. "And I obeyed him too even when I was at home. My mom was so confused why the house was so spotless, but Chuck gave me extra chores to do so I did them."

"Better to do it than face Chuck's wrath, I guess," I replied with a chuckle.

"For sure," he agreed, running his hand down my arm. "He's like the father I never had. Your whole family is my family, really."

His voice grew a little more serious, and I felt as though I had a little bit more of an understanding of Graham after he said this. Graham was lonely

throughout his childhood, except for when he was over at our house, particularly with Adam. They weren't just best friends. Adam was really like Graham's brother.

"Not me though, right?" I joked. "Because then this would be a little strange." I motioned to our bodies and the position we were in.

Graham chuckled. "No, you're... different."

"A good different?"

"Of course, a good different."

I smiled up at him then kissed his jaw. He leaned into my touch before backing off and moving to get out of bed.

"I'm going to pick up your bookshelf soon," he told me as he stood from the bed.

"You know, you really don't have to do that," I reminded him.

It was kind of embarrassing sending Graham to pick something up from my ex boyfriend, but it seemed important to him for whatever reason, so I wasn't going to stop him. All I could do was remind him that I would be okay even if he decided not to go get it.

Graham, of course, ignored my words.

"Where do you want it?" he asked, looking around my bedroom. "We could put it in that corner there, or we can move the bed to the other side and put it here. Or if you want, we could put it down in the living room. It would look nice there."

"Like Adam would be okay with that," I said with a scoff, crossing my arms over my chest as I sat up against the headboard.

"It doesn't matter what he thinks," Graham said, moving toward my door. "Let me know. I'm going to get dressed and go get it."

Then Graham walked out of the room, shutting the door behind him.

While Graham was gone, I took the chance to do some chores around my room and around the house. I started with reorganizing my closet, and when I opened it up and started pulling stuff out, I found one of Graham's shirts tucked in the corner.

I grabbed the shirt, remembering the morning I had thrown it in here. It was the morning Graham and I had woken up in my bed together for the first time, the time when it was accidental. I couldn't help but grin when thinking about the way our relationship evolved since then. That morning, Graham could barely even look at me, now he was spending many nights in my bed. It was a funny turn of events.

Grabbing the shirt and my own dirty clothes, I ran a load of laundry and started cleaning up downstairs. There was a wall in the living room that was so bare, I couldn't help but imagine my bookshelf there, filled with books and knick knacks to liven the space up.

I imagined this as my own house that I shared with a significant other where I could decorate to my heart's desire. But, of course, my situation was nowhere near the one I had just conjured in my head and I had to be careful not to let myself get too carried away with thinking like that. Graham would never stay with me long term. I knew that, even if it pained me to think of what we had as being temporary, I knew this wasn't forever.

I was sitting on the couch and folding my laundry when Adam walked in with his usual scowl on his face.

"Graham's not here?" he asked, stepping onto the freshly vacuumed carpet with his shoes.

"Hello to you too, Adam, I'm great, thanks for asking," I replied. "How are you?"

Adam rolled his eyes, standing in front of me as I continued folding clothes.

"Did he say where he was going?" Adam asked, ignoring my words. "We're supposed to go help Dad at the shop with something."

"I don't know, you have his phone number, don't you?" I retorted, raising my eyebrows and pulling another shirt out of the laundry basket.

Adam raised a brow at me, looking at the shirt I was currently folding.

"You're doing Graham's laundry now?" he asked. I couldn't tell if he was just confused or if he was suspecting something else was going on.

I looked at the shirt in my hands, and it was the one of Graham's I had in my closet. The shirt had the name of Dad's shop on the back, so it clearly had to be either Graham's or Adam's. And Adam knew it wasn't his, so I couldn't play it off that way.

"It must have just gotten mixed in with my stuff," I said, laying the folded shirt on the arm of the couch to keep it separate from my things.

There was no way Adam could piece together that something was going on with Graham and me just by his shirt being in with my laundry. Adam wasn't that perceptive. But he was looking at me like he didn't believe me, his mouth pressed in a straight line like he was holding himself back from saying something.

I sighed, pulling another shirt out of the laundry basket.

"What do you want to say, Adam?" I asked. "Because you clearly have something to say."

He sighed and ran his hand through his hair.

"It's nothing, just a stupid thought," he said, which surprised me. Adam never admitted to being stupid, even when he definitely was.

That moment, Graham entered the house and looked between the two of us.

"Oh, good, you're here," Graham said, directed at Adam. "You can help me get that shelf in here."

"Shelf?" Adam asked, his eyes squinting in confusion.

"I went to go get Rowan's bookshelf from the apartment for him," Graham explained. "I guess Brendan's moving out and needed it gone, so I got it so Rowan wouldn't have to."

The thing about Graham was that he really was just a good guy, so it wouldn't be surprising for him to do something like this just out of the kindness of his heart. This shouldn't be something that would tip Adam off about what was going on between the two of us.

Adam groaned and followed Graham out to his truck. I watched through the window as the two of them pulled the shelf out of the bed of the truck, both of them talking back and forth about something. Adam was probably bitching like always.

Graham walked backwards toward the house with the bottom part of the shelf in his hands. My eyes lingered on the way that his arms were flexed as he lifted the shelf. He led Adam into the living room and then looked at me for direction. I pointed to the empty wall I had earlier decided I wanted the shelf and they brought it there.

Once the shelf was on the ground, Graham pushed it up against the wall, then backed up slightly with his hands on his hips. He looked at the shelf and nodded.

"It looks good there," he said, turning to face me.

"It's not staying there is it?" Adam asked with a sour look.

"Unless you want to help me lug it upstairs right now, then yes, it's staying there," Graham replied with a shrug. "I think it looks good there."

It did look good where they had put it, and it made me feel a little less weird about having it here. Part of me was worried that having the shelf, especially in my bedroom, would remind me too much of the apartment and too much of living with Brendan. But with having it downstairs, it didn't

feel like that at all. It felt like a new piece for the space rather than something from living with Brendan.

"I like it there too," I said, looking at Adam with pleading eyes. I wasn't about to sit there and beg for him to let me keep it downstairs, but I wanted him to know that this was where I wanted to keep it.

Adam huffed, crossing his arms over his chest. "I guess I'm outnumbered anyway."

"It'll grow on you!" Graham said, clapping him on the shoulder. "Give me five minutes, then we can head to the shop."

**

Thanks for reading!

17

Rowan Warner

It was another Friday night with Adam out of the house which meant Graham and I got our much needed alone time without having to worry about Adam being around. Whenever Adam was gone, Graham let himself be a little more relaxed, which honestly did wonders for us. The time spent together was better, the sex was better, just everything was better when we didn't have to worry about my moody brother ruining everything.

So on a Friday night when the two of us were alone in the house, Graham was on top of me in my bed and pounding into me, filling me with so much pleasure I could hardly breathe. My knees were hiked up practically to my head, my hands gripping Graham's back, my nails sinking into his skin and pulling down, causing him to let out a low groan that I had become very familiar with.

Graham had one hand holding him up above me and the other touching me all over. I pulled him down closer to me, putting my mouth all over his chest, to his collarbone, then up to his neck and jaw, feeling his stubble scrape against my face.

Usually, I liked more of a clean shaven look, but Graham wore the stubble so well. I could deal with the beard burn as long as it was coming from him

Graham's thrusts suddenly became harder, so I gripped his back again, scratching every time he thrusted into me. By the look in his eyes, I could tell Graham was getting close. His eyes were wide, pupils dilated. I was getting louder the closer we were both getting, one of my hands moving to stroke myself to bring me closer.

Graham liked it when I was loud for him, though in the moment he pretended not to be. He covered my mouth with his hand, sometimes

putting his fingers in my mouth, and told me to quiet down. But there was no reason for us to be quiet when we were alone

I finished with a loud moan, one hand gripping the back of Graham's shoulder. Graham's hand came away from my mouth so he could hear me properly. He finished, grunting quietly a few moments later.

We were both breathing heavy, Graham letting himself lay on top of me, his head against my chest, rising and falling with my breaths.

"God..." Graham groaned, looking up at me with his chin on my chest.

I brushed my hand up and down his bare back, feeling the bumps where I had scratched him.

"It was so good you think I'm God?" I asked with a grin.

Graham smirked and kissed my chest, his eyes never leaving my face.

"Yeah, it was that good," he replied, rolling over to lie next to me.

As much as I loved the sex with Graham, I loved this part even more, just being able to lie with him afterwards. I loved how he held me and peppered my skin with gentle kisses. It somehow felt even more intimate than sleeping together, and it was something I wasn't used to with Brendan or anyone else I had slept with.

This felt more real, more serious, which scared the hell out of me. I could tell myself a million times that what I had with Graham was temporary and that it wasn't as serious to him as it felt to me, but it still didn't make me feel any different. When this did eventually end, it would take a toll on me. I should have been trying to protect my heart, but I couldn't put a damper on this even if I tried.

"Hey, are you coming with us out on the boat tomorrow?" Graham asked, turning his head on the pillow to look at me.

"I didn't know you guys were taking the boat out tomorrow," I replied, turning to lie on my side.

Graham nodded. "It's me, Adam, Dean, Cade, Tim, and John. I think Dean is taking Nora. You should come."

"I wasn't invited."

Graham smiled. "I'm inviting you now."

It was hard to say no to that. I'd probably go just about anywhere if Graham was the one inviting me.

My parents had bought the boat a few years ago which prompted Adam, Dean, and Graham to get their boating licenses so they could use it. Dad had the boat docked at a lake about half an hour from here.

"Sure, I'll go," I said. "I haven't really done anything like that this summer with everything going on."

Not only that, but I didn't really have anyone to do anything with until now. Every summer I spent with Brendan, I did everything with him and his friends. Whether it was trips to the beach, the lake, the amusement park, or anything else, we did it together. Single me had no one to do anything with.

"It'll be fun," Graham assured me. "We'll have lunch, swim a little, you can watch me drive the boat." He grinned over at me and I giggled, looking up at the ceiling.

"Oh yeah, watching you drive the boat is going to be so hot with my brothers there," I joked.

Graham shrugged and sat up, the blanket falling and pooling at his hips.

"I was also thinking you and I could maybe go out on our own some time," Graham said, facing away from me as he got out of bed and looked for wherever he threw his clothes.

"On the boat?" I asked, confused.

"No, in general. Like a date."

He still wasn't looking at me, and he said it so quietly it was almost like it pained him to say the words. I couldn't help but laugh at the situation.

"Graham, you were just fucking me into my mattress and you're nervous about asking me out on a date?"

Graham pulled his pants on then turned and grinned at me, coming over to my side of the bed and leaning over me with his face close to mine.

"I wasn't nervous," he muttered, still grinning.

I quickly pecked his lips and spoke against them. "You were."

"Maybe a little," he admitted. He stood up to his full height, looking down at me. "I guess I just didn't know how you would take that."

"You didn't know I would want to go on a date with you?" I almost laughed again, but Graham's face looked so serious, I had to stop myself.

"I kind of don't know where we stand," Graham replied, scratching the back of his neck. "And I know that's mostly, okay entirely, my fault, but I like you, Rowan."

Graham was voicing the same concern I had about the two of us. I had no idea where we stood or what was actually going on between the two of us. He was still hung up on the fact that he didn't want Adam knowing about anything going on between us. And I was still grieving the future I thought I had and working through the trauma inflicted on me from my last relationship.

Now Graham was opening up slightly, being a little vulnerable. And I owed it to him to open myself up to him.

"I like you too, Graham," I replied, smiling at him reassuringly. "Let's go out and see what happens."

Graham smiled again and nodded, then leaned down and kissed my forehead before walking out of the room.

***

The next day, Adam came home early since we were going out on the boat. He walked into the kitchen, where Graham and I were packing sandwiches and waters into the cooler.

"You're coming with us?" Adam asked, raising his eyebrows at me.

"Yeah, thanks for the invite," I sarcastically replied as I closed the cooler.

"You don't like being out in the sun," Adam responded, rolling his eyes. "I would have invited you if I thought you would want to come."

"Sure you would have." I didn't believe that for a second.

"Whatever," he grumbled. "Let's leave in twenty. I'm going to shower."

Adam turned and jogged up the stairs.

"You don't like being out in the sun?" Graham asked after Adam left the room.

"It's not that," I said. "I just burn easy."

"Are you sure you want to go? You don't have to come just because I want you to," Graham said, picking up the cooler from the floor.

I smiled at him. "I want to come. I'll be fine."

I wasn't used to having someone be so concerned for me. It was refreshing and touching while also being confusing and strange.

"Alright, I'm going to go put this in the truck," Graham said before leaving the room.

While he was gone, I got the rest of my stuff ready. I made sure I had my sunblock, sunglasses, hat, and a change of clothes. I also brought a book and stuffed it in my bag.

Once Adam was finished getting ready, the three of us piled into Graham's truck. This time I took the chance of sitting closer to Graham. I didn't think Adam would even notice, and I wouldn't have to listen to him complain about me sitting too close to *him* like last time the three of us were in the truck.

The issue with Graham's truck wasn't just that it was a bench seat so I had to sit between the two of them, but it also had barely working air conditioning. So it was about eighty five degrees out and Graham had both the windows open, warm air flying through the truck and doing very little to actually cool us off.

Adam and Graham spoke loudly over the sound of the wind, talking about some baseball game one of their friends had tickets to.

I looked over at Graham. He had one hand on the steering wheel while his other arm was resting on the open window. He had no business looking so good while just driving. I had to turn and face forward before I started drooling or kissing him in front of Adam.

We eventually made it to the lake and Graham parked the truck as close as he could to where the boat was docked. Graham got out of the truck first and I slid out through the driver's seat, shutting the door behind me before following him to the back of the truck. He pulled out my bag and handed it to me before grabbing his own bag and then the cooler.

"I can grab your bag for you," I told him. "I know the cooler is heavy."

"I got it," Graham said with a grin.

He really did have it. His arm muscles flexed as he held onto the cooler and I couldn't keep my eyes off him as he walked off toward the dock.

Adam pulled his bag out of the bed then shut the tailgate and motioned for me to follow Graham toward the boat. The two of us walked together, Graham quite a way in front of us, in silence. I couldn't really tell what Adam's mood was at the moment. It seemed like he always had something to be moody about, especially when it came to me.

"Are you mad that I'm coming with you?" I asked him, pulling my bag up higher onto my shoulder.

He glanced a me briefly out of the corner of his eye. I couldn't tell if he was glaring or not. He just seemed to have a permanent glare on his face, so sometimes he didn't mean it.

"No," he responded. "I don't care that you're coming with us."

"Well, I don't buy that you would have invited me even if you thought I would have wanted to come," I said, raising my eyebrows. "But I also don't want to intrude on everything you do with your friends if you don't want me there."

I felt a little guilty for not even thinking about the fact that I was butting into a hang out with Adam and his friends, even if two of my brothers would be there. I hated the thought of going somewhere and everybody involved didn't want me there.

Adam let out a long sigh. "It's fine, Row. It doesn't matter."

Only it did matter to me. And now I felt a little sick at the thought of joining in on this day when none of my brothers had thought to invite me along. I talked to Dean almost every day, yet he didn't mention anything about it.

So now I was going to get on this boat in a foul mood thinking that the only person who actually wanted my presence there was the person I was secretly sleeping with.

Adam and I walked together the rest of the way to the boat. Graham was already on it doing all the safety checks and making sure we had everything we needed. While Adam helped Graham out with that, I put my stuff down and took up a spot on the back of the boat where the shade was. If I was going to sit there and read, I didn't want to get sun burned.

It was a little while later when the others showed up. Their friends John and Tim brought another cooler with them, undoubtedly one with alcohol in it.

Dean and Nora stepped onto the boat, followed by Cade and his tutor, Miles, who looked terrified as the boat swayed under his feet.

"Hey! I didn't know you'd be here," Nora said with a wide smiling, coming to sit beside me.

"Yeah, me neither until last night," I said, my smile strained as I tried not to let how I really felt show.

"Well, I'm so glad you're here," she replied. "Now I have someone to talk to."

Nora leaned in closer to me, pulling her sunglasses down slightly so I could see her eyes.

"So, how is the living situation going?" she whispered. "With those *feelings* ?"

Of course, I couldn't tell her the truth about what those feelings actually amounted to.

"It's been fine," I told her. "Not much has changed."

That at least wasn't a lie. Nothing had really changed between Graham and me since the last time I saw Nora. She just didn't know what that actually meant.

"Hey, Rowan!" Dean exclaimed as he came to sit beside Nora.

I greeted my brother with a nod and tight smile. I wasn't angry at him for not inviting me. I just felt sad and a little hurt, but that wasn't his fault. It wasn't like he was obligated to invite me to everything. Dean clearly knew something was wrong by my greeting, but he didn't say anything as he threw his arm around Nora and leaned back in his seat.

Cade came to the back of the boat with Miles a moment later, having Miles set his things down and sit under the shade where I was.

"Miles wants to sit under here so he doesn't burn to a crisp," Cade told me. "And I told him that's exactly what you're doing too."

Miles looked embarrassed, his face turning a slight shade of pink as he bent down and took a book out of his bag.

"I'm going to go up there and see if they'll let me drive the boat," Cade said, mostly to Miles, before he turned and went back to the others.

"Kid's got wishful thinking if he thinks Adam and Graham are going to let him drive," Dean said with a laugh.

We finally pulled away from the dock a few moments later. I watched Graham as he drove the boat, trying not to make my stare too obvious. It was hard not to ogle at him with the way the wind swept through his hair and made his shirt ride up.

Eventually we stopped and anchored somewhere. Adam put the ladder down so whoever went in the lake could get back up into the boat. Tim immediately tore his shirt off and jumped off the boat into the water.

"Come on in, the water is fine!" Tim exclaimed once he surfaced. No one made any move to follow him in there.

I stood up and pulled my sunblock out of my bag to put it on. Even being under the shade, I didn't want to risk getting burned. Miles seemed to have the same idea because he drenched himself in sunblock and put a hat on before he sat back down under the shade.

Cade eventually followed Tim into the water and the two of them swam around near the boat for a while.

I did my best to stay focused on my book. I didn't want to get caught gawking at Graham the second he took his shirt off. In fact, I was so engrossed with my book that I didn't notice he took his shirt off until Tim and Cade were back on the boat and Tim let out a loud curse.

"Fucking hell, Graham!" Tim exclaimed. "Whoever you're fucking did a number on your back!"

My eyes instantly shot up and looked toward Graham, who was turning his head trying to see what Tim was talking about. Graham turned around and that was when I saw it. His back was covered in dark red scratches.

My mouth hung open in shock. I was mortified, but at the same time grateful that nobody knew I was the one who put those scratches on his back. I made a mental note to keep my shirt on, in case there was anything Graham had left on my body that would cause anyone to put two and two together.

"Jesus Christ," Adam said, lowering his sunglasses to get a better look at Graham's back. "How did you not feel that?"

"Well, I did feel it," Graham replied. "I just didn't know it looked like that."

Cade was covering his mouth and laughing like an immature little boy.

Nora lightly kicked my ankle to get me to look at her, then shot me a look of sympathy. Little did she know she was being sympathetic for the wrong reason.

"I didn't know you were seeing anyone, Graham," Dean said, standing from his spot next to Nora and going over to the group.

Graham didn't seem to know what to say to that, so he just gave him his signature shrug. That was just how Graham was, so no one questioned him further about it. He didn't often offer explanations.

Once they had all gotten over the state of Graham's back, they all jumped into the water, leaving just Nora, Miles, and me on the boat.

Later on when they came back on the boat, I couldn't keep myself from staring at Graham's wet skin, slightly red from the sun, and his soaked hair pushed back on his head. He had to stop being so good looking with other people around.

The only thing that took my eyes off of Graham was the incessant buzzing of my phone in my pocket and the name on the screen I didn't want to see.

**

Thanks for reading!!

18

Rowan Warner

My knee was bouncing as I sat in the truck between Graham and Adam on our way home from the lake. I couldn't stop thinking about Brendan calling me and what he could possibly have to say.

Of course, my mind went to the worst of things. He could have figured out that I was staying at Adam's and Graham's house, he could be there waiting for me when we got back, he could come there when I wasn't expecting it and do something to hurt me.

I could tell that Graham was feeling my anxiety. He kept glancing at me, his hand twitching like he wanted to put it on my knee to calm me. His jaw was firmly set, clearly frustrated that he couldn't do or say anything with Adam in the car.

The ride home felt like the longest half hour of my life, and when we finally got there I couldn't even let myself relax. Brendan's car wasn't anywhere around, but what if he was hiding? What if he was going to pop up somewhere as soon as I was alone?

"Are you alright?" Graham whispered, his eyes wide with concern, after Adam had gotten out of the truck.

I shook my head. "I'll tell you later."

I could talk to him once Adam went into his room. We spent all day out in the sun and Adam looked like he was about two seconds from falling asleep, so I knew as soon as he went inside he would go up to his room to lie down.

Graham didn't look too pleased as he got out of the truck, leaving the door open for me to slide out behind him. The two of them got everything out of

the bed of the truck, Graham grabbing my bag and ignoring my attempt to take it from him.

When the three of us got inside, I was fully expecting Adam to immediately go up to his room, but he put his things down and went to sit down on the couch. While he turned on the TV, Graham went into the kitchen to take out the left overs from the cooler. I stood in the doorway to the living room, trying to will Adam to go upstairs so I could have some alone time with Graham, but of course, that didn't happen. Adam stayed put, his feet up on the coffee table without a care in the world.

"Hey," Graham whispered from the kitchen.

I followed the sound of his voice and entered the kitchen, where he was looking at me from where he stood in front of the fridge.

"Are you going to tell me what's going on?" he asked, sounding concerned. "Did something happen?"

Just as I was about to answer him, Adam came walking into the kitchen and I swore my eye twitched in irritation.

"I'm starving," Adam groaned, moving past Graham to look at what we had in the fridge.

"You know what? Let me just make something quick for dinner," I offered. The quicker I got Adam fed, hopefully the quicker he would get out of here.

Graham stared at his friend like he could make him vanish with just his eyes as Adam moved away from the fridge after taking out a bottle of water. Adam leaned against the counter and drank the water in one long sip while I started getting dinner ready.

I could feel the tension radiating off of Graham while Adam seemed oblivious to it.

As I quickly made dinner, I could feel my phone buzzing in my pocket yet again. I ignored it, hoping Adam and Graham couldn't hear it and wouldn't

question me about it.

The thought of who was waiting on the other side of the phone for me made my movements shaky. I didn't want to have to talk to Brendan or have to face him. The thought of him knowing where I lived and eventually coming here, made me so anxious I felt nauseous. I wanted to be free of him and free of this fear.

While I finished cooking, Graham put everything away that we had taken on the boat before coming back into the kitchen. When dinner was done, the three of us pulled plates out of the cabinet, plated our food, and went out to the living room to sit and eat on the couch.

I sat on the end with Graham in the middle and Adam on the other end. Adam went to turn on the TV and looked at me out of the corner of his eyes.

"This is weird," Adam said, looking over at me.

"What is?" I asked.

"You sitting out here with us," Adam replied.

He didn't say it rudely or even act like it bothered him. I usually sat at the kitchen table to eat when Adam was home at least. When I was alone with Graham, the two of us would eat together, usually on the couch to watch something. I hadn't even noticed myself following the two of them out to the living room. I was just so out of my head I was on autopilot.

"Adam," Graham grumbled before shoveling a spoonful of rice into his mouth.

Adam just shrugged and settled on a channel before starting to eat his dinner. The two of them were way too invested in the car show Adam had put on. I couldn't imagine being a mechanic for a living and then going home and watching a show of people working on cars. But the two of them had their eyes glued to the screen.

"Dude, that Bronco's a beauty," Adam said. "You should do that paint job on your truck."

Graham shook his head. "I need to do some actual work on the truck before I repaint it."

"What do you have to do to your truck?" I asked, half expecting to get ignored due to Graham being too focused on the TV.

"Oh, it just needs everything, short of an engine," Adam replied with a laugh.

Graham looked at me with a sheepish smile. "Nothing I can't fix."

I didn't understand his attachment to that truck.

When I finished my dinner, I brought my plate into the kitchen and rinsed it off before placing it in the dishwasher. Then I started washing the dishes I used to make dinner. A few moments later, Graham came into the kitchen with both his and Adam's plates and put them in the dishwasher.

"Adam went upstairs to shower," Graham said, leaning next to me against the counter. "Do you want to talk about what's going on?"

I let out a sigh and nodded, turning off the sink and wiping my hands on a towel before leaning agains the counter next to Graham.

"While we were on the boat, I kept getting a bunch of phone calls," I started. "They were coming from Brendan."

Graham's expression immediately darkened at the mention of my ex boyfriend. He crossed his arms over his chest.

"And he started calling me while I was making dinner," I continued. "Obviously, I didn't answer, but it's scaring me, Graham. I don't know what he wants and I don't want him showing up here or at work to get to me. I want him to just leave me alone."

"Let me call him," Graham said, his voice low and serious. "Let me talk to him and tell him to leave you the fuck alone or else he won't like the consequences."

"I don't want to antagonize him," I replied, shaking my head. "It'll just make him mad and make things worse."

"Telling him to leave you alone isn't antagonizing," Graham said. He wasn't shouting, but it was clear that he was holding himself back. "What he's doing is antagonizing. You owe him nothing and he should know that."

The thought of Graham calling Brendan and defending me was somehow both endearing and extremely embarrassing. It was sweet that he wanted to defend me, but having someone else fight my battles for me made me feel weak.

"Please Graham just... don't, okay?" I pleaded. "I'm just going to block his number, which I should have already done. I just wanted to tell you what was going on."

Graham pressed his lips tightly together, letting out a deep breath before nodding.

"Okay," he said. "Blocking the number is a good idea. And you'll let me know if he's bothering you?"

"Of course, I will."

"Okay, because you know I... I really do care about you, Rowan," he started, his gaze softening as he looked at me. "I know this is really new for us, but I care and I want to be able to help you if there's something going on with you."

I smiled and pulled him closer to me with my arm around his waist.

"I really care about you too," I said, resting my head on his chest. "So you have to keep fixing your truck because I don't want you riding around in some death trap."

Graham laughed, his chest vibrating under my cheek.

"It's not a death trap."

"Sure it's not."

***

It wasn't until a few nights later when I was lying in bed, about to fall asleep that a rock flew through my window, shattering the glass and causing me to scream like I was being murdered. I jumped off the bed and hit the floor with my hands over my head.

My bedroom door burst open an instant later, Adam and Graham running in. One of them had flipped the lights on. Graham was immediately at my side, his hand on my shoulder while Adam was at the other side of the room looking out the window.

"Rowan, look at me, are you hurt?" Graham asked, getting down on the floor with me.

"I'm okay, I'm okay," I replied, though I didn't know if I was more trying to convince him of that or myself.

"Come here," Graham said, reaching for me and pulling me into his arms. "You're shaking."

I hadn't noticed it until he said it, but I was shaking like a leaf. I couldn't stop shaking even if I tried. Graham held me tightly, rocking us back and forth.

Adam was still over by the window. I could hear him moving the glass around.

When he came over to where Graham and I were, I expected Graham to let go of me, but he held me tightly even with Adam standing over us. Adam had the rock in one hand and a wrench in his other.

"You keep a wrench by your bed?" I asked, my voice as shaky as my body.

I would have laughed at the thought of Adam coming in here to protect me by hitting someone with a wrench if I wasn't so terrified.

"Who the fuck is throwing rocks through your window?" Adam asked, ignoring my question.

"Who do you think?" Graham answered for me.

"How does he even know he lives here?" Adam questioned. "And what room is his?"

Graham just shrugged and let go of me to let me up. Adam looked me in the eyes, a hard expression on his face. I hadn't even noticed I had been crying until I felt a tear roll off my chin.

"We need to call the cops," Adam said, looking to Graham. "File a report or something."

It didn't take long for the cops to show up, look at the damage, and take our statements. They took the stupid rock for evidence, but I was sure it was just a rock from our yard and didn't know what else they'd be able to find out from it.

I sat on my bed while Adam and Graham were trying to secure a tarp over the broken window.

"Thanks," I said once they were finished. It was past one in the morning at this point. We all had work later, but they still stayed up to help me.

"Come on," Graham said, motioning for me to follow them out of the room.

"I'm just going to go back to bed," I told him, though the thought of sleeping in here with the window how it was terrified me.

"Not in here you're not," Graham said. "Come to my room."

My eyes widened and looked over at the back of Adam's head. There was no way he didn't hear that.

"I'm going to take the couch," Graham told me, clearly seeing my bewildered expression.

"You don't have to do that, Graham," I started. "I can take-"

Graham silenced me with a stern look, so I wordlessly followed him out of my room, down the hall, and into his room. It wasn't until the two of us stood in the doorway that I realized I had never even been in Graham's room. Each time the two of us were together, it was always in my bedroom.

"Are you really okay?" Graham asked me, his eyes wide with concern.

"I'm fine," I told him. "A little shaken up, but I'm fine."

I looked around the room, taking it all in. His walls were a dark cream color and he had a framed poster of a truck identical to his hanging near his closet door. A pair of his work boots were kicked off in the corner of the room while one of his button down work shirts was thrown over the back of his desk chair. His comforter was thrown over to the side of his bed from when he sprung up at the sound of my scream.

Graham placed a comforting hand on my shoulder, his thumb brushing over my collarbone.

"Try to get some sleep," he said in a hushed tone, then quickly kissed my forehead before leaving the room to go down to the couch.

I just stood there for a moment, staring at Graham's empty bed and thinking about what had occurred tonight. I would be lucky if I could even get a wink of sleep after having my window smashed open with a rock by who I was assuming was my crazy ex boyfriend.

I let out a sigh, rubbed my eyes, and turned off the light before climbing into Graham's bed and wrapping myself in his blankets.

I stayed there for a while, staring at the ceiling, but when the clock hit four in the morning, I got up and made the bed before heading downstairs. The coffee was made and breakfast was cooking by the time Graham got up at

five, rubbing his eye and pushing his hair back as he sleepily walked into the kitchen.

"How long have you been awake?" Graham asked, taking in the scene in the kitchen.

"A while," I said, not wanting to admit that I never went back to sleep, though I was sure he would be able to figure that out. I turned away from Graham and grabbed a mug from the cabinet before pouring him a cup of coffee.

"Thanks," he said, accepting the mug from me. He blew lightly at the steaming liquid before taking a small sip.

"Was the couch okay?" I asked, turning back to the eggs on the stove.

"Yeah, it was fine."

"I'm going to have to call someone about that window today," I said, finishing up with what was on the stove.

"Don't worry about that. I'll take care of it."

Graham was sitting at the kitchen table with his hands wrapped around his cup, watching my every move. His eyes followed me as I plated the omelette I had just made and placed it down in front of him.

"Aren't you going to eat?" he asked as I handed him a fork.

"I already ate," I said, going back to the stove to cook Adam's omelette. He would be waking up any minute and if he saw that I made Graham breakfast but not him, he would be all pissed at me.

I could tell Graham wanted to say something else, but he stayed quiet and stuck his fork into his food. It was tough for him to figure out what to do because I knew it seemed like I was going crazy. And I kind of was. But cooking was a way for me to cope. It was what I always did when I was anxious or stressed. I was already thinking about going to the grocery store after work and picking up what I needed for other dishes I had in mind.

Adam came down the stairs and into the kitchen just as I was finishing up his breakfast.

"Sit at the table," I told him as I plated his food. He shot be a confused glance, but listened to me anyway and sat across from Graham.

I set down Adam's breakfast in front of him and poured him a cup of coffee before cleaning up the kitchen.

"I made you both lunch. It's in the fridge. Don't forget to take it," I told them as I left the kitchen to take a shower before work.

"He's really freaking out," Adam whispered to Graham as I headed toward the stairs.

I didn't stay long enough to hear Graham's response.

**

Thanks for reading!

19

Rowan Warner

I managed to avoid both Adam and Graham for the rest of the morning before we all had to head to work. The two of them were out of the house first, and I left soon after. I was worried about leaving the house with my window the way it was, but there was no way I was going to stay home alone all day by myself when Brendan could show up at any moment.

On my way in, I stopped for coffees for Janet and me. I knew that I was definitely going to need the caffeine to stay awake all day.

When I walked into work, I dropped Janet's coffee off at her desk while she was nowhere to be found, then I went to my office. It wasn't until almost an hour later Janet came into my office with her coffee in hand.

"Thanks for this," she said with a grin.

"No worries," I said as I was typing a reply to an email.

"Everything alright?" Janet asked, tilting her head slightly.

I looked up from my computer.

"Of course it is. Why wouldn't it be?" I blurted out, more rushed than I intended. I clearly didn't convince her as she looked at me with an expression of disbelief.

"You just look tired," she said. "We'll have lunch together today, alright?"

I nodded in agreement and Janet left my office to go back to her own.

"Rowan!"

I picked my head up from my desk at the sound of Janet's voice, realizing then that I had fallen asleep in my office with my face down on the desk. I glanced over at the clock and noticed it was lunch time and I had been asleep for over an hour when I should have been working.

Janet stood at the door of my office, looking at me impatiently with her arms crossed over her chest.

"I'm so sorry, Janet, I'll work through lunch to make up the time," I said with a sheepish smile.

She narrowed her eyes at me and shook her head.

"You absolutely will *not* be working through lunch," she replied. "You clearly need an energy boost, so get up. We're going out for lunch."

"I brought my own lunch," I started. "Seriously, I can just eat while I work."

"Nope, you're coming with me," Janet said. "I'm buying. And I'm your boss, so you can't say no."

Well, I couldn't argue with that.

I followed Janet out of my office and the two of us walked over to the cafe we liked to frequent in the same plaza as our bank. After we got our food, we sat down at one of the tables outside the cafe.

"So, are you going to tell me why you're falling asleep at your desk today?" Janet asked, raising her eyebrows at me as she took a sip of her drink.

"Are you asking as my boss so I have to do as you say, or are you asking as my friend?"

Janet rolled her eyes. "I'm asking as your concerned friend, Rowan."

"You don't need to be concerned," I assured her. "It's being... handled."

"What's being handled?"

I was touched by Janet's concern. She really was my only friend at the moment. All of my other friends were ones that I shared with Brendan and didn't talk to anymore. My friendship with Garrett was short-lived and he was trying to get me to have sex with him the whole time. Janet was the only person in my life I could truly call my friend. Even with her being my boss, I knew she cared about me personally, beyond our professional relationship.

I let out a sigh, then gave Janet a sad smile.

"My ex boyfriend started blowing up my phone over the weekend," I started, "then, last night, someone through a rock through my window. I assume it was him. I couldn't sleep after that, so I've been up since midnight."

"Oh my God, Rowan!" Janet exclaimed, reaching across the table to hold my hand in hers. "I'm so sorry. Are you alright?"

"I'm... okay," I said. "Physically, I'm fine. But I'm really anxious about the whole thing. I don't know what he wants from me, if he's going to show up at the house, at work..."

"If he shows up at the bank, then I'm calling the police," Janet said, her expression hard and serious. "You should really look into getting a restraining order against him."

"I know I should, but I'm just so..." I trailed off.

"Stressed out?" Janet finished for me, squeezing my hand. "I get it, I really do. I've been through something similar with my ex. You know you're strong just for getting out of there, right? No matter how long it took."

"Thanks, Janet," I replied, squeezing her hand back. "You are too."

The two of us finished our lunch and went back to work with about ten minutes to spare. I used that time to look up some companies I could call to come by the house and fix my window.

"It's just one window?" the man on the phone asked.

"Yes, just one."

"Do you know the measurements?"

"Uh... no, I don't," I replied, feeling embarrassed. "I could measure it when I get home today and call back tomorrow?" Even though that would cause me to have to live without a window in my bedroom for even longer, I was desperate to get someone in there to fix it.

We confirmed that I would call back tomorrow and hung up the call. Then I had to catch up on all the work I neglected to do because of my impromptu nap in the middle of the day. The rest of my work day was spent responding to emails and having meetings with a few different customers. I closed up with Janet and then went straight to the grocery store.

My mind was too clouded and I couldn't remember exactly what it was that I needed from the store. I knew deep down the reason I came to the store was to avoid being home alone after work. Adam and Graham got home at differing times each day. They were usually home by six, but sometimes they stayed to finish up on something instead of having to pick up where they left off the next day.

If I went home and was all by myself for hours, I would be so paranoid I would be glued to the couch, waiting for Adam and Graham to come home. I would sit there in silence, listening for anything out of the ordinary, probably feel like someone was watching me. Even as I walked through the grocery store, I kept my head up and alert, looking for Brendan in every face.

The more I thought about it, the less unbelievable the whole situation was. Brendan was unhinged. He would get mad at the smallest things and I was the one who paid the price every time. He would throw things, break things, hit me. And now he was angry at me again for ignoring him, but this time he didn't have the same access to me as before, so he had to change his approach.

As I was looking through the baking aisle, trying to find something to make for dessert tonight, a familiar voice called out to me.

"Hi, baby!" my mother exclaimed as she walked down the aisle. She pushed her cart up against the shelf and pulled me into her arms.

"Hey, Mom," I replied, hugging her back.

My mother was one of the last people I wanted to see at the moment, not because I actually didn't want to *see* her, but because I didn't want to have to lie to her and act like everything was fine with me. I was sure Adam hadn't said anything to her about what had happened last night, and he probably didn't tell our father about it either. If she had known, I would have heard from her before now. I didn't want to cause her to worry more about me than she already did.

"What are you making tonight?" she asked, peeking over into my cart.

"I'm not really sure yet," I said. "I'm just grabbing some stuff and I'll see what else I have when I get home."

"I saw this recipe on Pinterest I think you'll love, hold on," she replied, taking out her phone. "It's chicken and orzo with spinach and artichoke in a parmesan garlic sauce. I made it the other night and it was fabulous."

"That does sound good."

"Ugh, I'll find it after," she said, getting fed up with her phone. "How are things at home? I haven't heard from you since the cookout."

That instantly made me feel guilty. I hadn't reached out to my mother since I had seen her last, and I knew she was trying to give me space while I settled in.

"Things are good," I told her, which was true except for the incident the night before. But that had nothing to do with Adam, which is what she really wanted to know. She wanted to ask "how are things at home *with Adam?* "

"Adam's done being a brat?" Mom asked, raising her eyebrows.

"Well, no," I replied. "But he's a lot better than when I first moved in, so I'll take what I can get." It was that and the fact that he spent a lot more time out of the house now, so I not only didn't have to deal with him, but I could spend alone time with Graham which was what I really wanted to be doing.

"You boys should come over for dinner some night this week," Mom replied, placing her hand on my arm. "I miss having a full house. I practically force Cade to bring friends over for dinner just so I have people to cook for."

That made me feel more guilty than I already did.

"We will," I assured her. "Definitely."

Mom sent me a wide smile. "Alright, I'll let you get back to shopping so you can get home. I love you."

I smiled back at her. "Love you too."

My mother walked away with a wide grin on her face like she had just won the lottery and not just bumped into her son at the grocery store. I was firm on my decision not to tell her about what happened the night before, because otherwise that smile wouldn't be there. But I still felt like an awful son for keeping her in the dark. All she wanted was to be close with all her children and be one big happy family. I couldn't let her know that I was having issues with Brendan. It would break her heart.

I pulled a brownie mix off the shelf and finished the rest of my food shopping. Before heading to the checkout, I picked up a box of condoms and hid them underneath the rest of my stuff in case I ran into my mother again. I didn't need her asking me any questions about *that* . I knew I was running low and I didn't want to run into the situation where Graham and I didn't have them when we needed them and then would have to have an awkward conversation about going without that I wasn't ready for.

I went to the self checkout and bagged all my items into my reusable bags after scanning them. Then I made the drive home after packing everything into my car. It was well after six, so I wast hoping that someone would be at the house by the time I got there.

Seeing both Adam and Graham's vehicles in the driveway when I got home caused me to let out a heavy sigh of relief. I parked my car in my usual spot and gathered all the grocery bags on my arms before heading inside.

Adam was sitting on the couch, his feet up on the coffee table, watching TV when I entered. He barely spared me a glance, nodding in my direction when he saw me. I rolled my eyes at him but bit my tongue to stop myself from saying something about him not offering to help.

I quickly put all the groceries away, keeping the condoms in the bag and throwing my other bags in with them to hide the box. Adam walked into the kitchen as I was searching up the recipe my mom had told me about at the store. He let out a burp and I looked up at him, scrunching my face in disgust.

"Are you cooking tonight?" he asked. "Because if not, I'm going to order pizza."

"Don't order a pizza," I told him. I was trying to get Adam and Graham to stop ordering out so much. It was a work in progress, but I knew the two of them enjoyed my cooking. I was pretty sure my cooking was at least part of the reason Adam stopped being so hostile toward me.

"Brendan didn't try to call you again, did he?" Adam asked.

"No, I blocked him... how did you even know about that?" I tried not to sound suspicious, but I couldn't tell whether or not I was successful.

"I overheard you telling the cop," he replied.

Right. I told the cop. Adam didn't hear my conversation with Graham.

"Well, I blocked him. I think that's probably why he's pissed at me," I responded with a sigh. "By the way, me, you, and Graham are going to dinner one night this week at Mom and Dad's. I saw her at the store."

"Okay."

"You didn't tell Dad about last night, did you?" It was a toss up about whether or not Dad would actually tell Mom if he knew, but the potential was there and then she would know I just lied to her face.

"Not exactly," Adam replied.

"What do you mean?"

"I told him the window was broken," he started. "Because we left early do go get a new one."

"A new window?"

"Yes?" Adam looked at me like I was stupid. "Or did you like the breeze in there with the broken glass?"

"Shut up," I said. "And you two put a new window in?"

"Graham's putting it in right now."

I left the kitchen without another word and made for my room.

Sure enough, Graham was at the window with a drill, screwing something in. He didn't hear me walk in.

"I called someone today about fixing the window," I said when he stopped with the drill.

He turned to look at me. "Oh, hey."

"I had someone coming," I repeated, fighting the grin that was sprouting on my face.

"I told you I was going to take care of it," Graham said, placing the drill down in the tool box on the floor. "This is me taking care of it."

"Well, being a handyman does suit you," I said, finally letting the grin form.

"There's more where this came from," Graham said with a smile of his own, walking toward me. "I can do all sorts of things."

"I'm sure you can," I said. "You are very good with your hands."

Graham mocked a bewildered expression, placing his hand on his chest like he was clutching at pearls.

"Get your mind out of the gutter!" he exclaimed.

"Graham..." I trailed. "Thank you, really."

He shrugged. "It's nothing."

"It's not nothing."

He just shrugged again, like he always did.

"I get if you're still freaked out and don't want to sleep in here," Graham started, "You can sleep in my room again if you want. I'll crash in here."

I was overwhelmed with how much I felt for Graham. He made me feel so cared for like no one ever had before. Part of me wanted to just say fuck being a secret, and fuck Adam if he gave us any trouble, and just *be together.* But we hadn't talked about it, and it was still so new. I didn't know Graham's feelings on the matter, and I didn't know if I wanted to change the arrangement we had going on.

But when he was like *this* , doing things for me, understanding me, and caring for me, it made me feel dizzy. My mind swirled and there was a pit in my stomach when I let myself think about potentially having this be my future, having *Graham* be my future.

The other part of me knew it was too soon, that these feelings came hard and fast and I had to slow them down. I was getting ahead of myself, ahead of us, and if I pushed too hard or made the wrong move, I would lose this before it even turned into something real.

**

thanks for reading! leave your thoughts

20

Rowan Warner

"Are you ready to go yet?" Adam asked impatiently from the kitchen doorway.

I glanced at the time and rolled my eyes. We were perfectly on time. It wasn't like it took an hour to get to our parents' house. We were going over there because my mother had invited us over for dinner when I saw her at the grocery store. She was never one to forget an invitation, so the very next day she called me to confirm that the three of us were going over for dinner sometime during the week. We agreed on Thursday night, so that was where we were headed.

I baked a pie to bring over to dessert and wanted to let it cool before I packed it up. My mother was the one who taught me never to show up anywhere empty handed. I didn't know if that so much counted when the place where I was going was my parents' house, but I wanted to bring something anyway. Ever since getting my window smashed with a rock in the middle of the night, I had been doing a lot of cooking and baking as part of my stress relief.

Luckily I had two other men in the house who were willing to eat anything I made, so I could just keep cooking and cooking and nothing went to waste. I even sent them to the shop with plates of brownies and cookies to give to all their coworkers, and I brought the same in for mine. Janet was blaming me for her cheating on her diet with all the sweets.

"I'm ready," I said to Adam, covering up the pie.

I turned to face him and he was leaning on the door frame of the kitchen, his arms crossed over his chest. He wore a plain white t-shirt with a small stain on the chest and baggy blue jeans with a hole in the knee. Adam always put in the least effort possible.

"Who's driving?" I asked.

"Graham."

I let out a frustrated breath. "That rickety old thing is going to mess up my pie. If we get there and the pie is ruined I'm going to be so pissed."

"Hey, I heard that," Graham said as he descended the stairs. He grinned at me when he reached the kitchen. "Better hold on tight then, Row."

I couldn't recall if Graham always looked this good or if the situation the two of us were in was causing him to put more effort into what he wore. Graham wore a plain white t-shirt like Adam, only his was void of any stains and tucked neatly into his dark pants. Over it he wore an open light blue button down shirt.

"I don't mean to hate on your truck," I replied after blatantly checking him out. "I just don't want my pie to suffer."

Graham shrugged. "It'll still taste the same."

"The presentation matters," I retorted.

"Okay."

"Are you two finished?" Adam snapped, surprising the two of us.

I was so shocked, that I didn't know what to say. Luckily, Graham took it in stride.

"I don't know why you're so moody," Graham said to Adam.

Adam shot him a glare. "I'm not moody."

Graham just shrugged at him in response.

Clearly, he was moody. And now I was worried it could have been because he was catching on about Graham and me. At this point I wasn't sure Adam finding out would even be an issue, but I was sure that Graham would want

to tell him about the two of us himself when the time came, not have him catch on and find out while we were keeping it a secret from him.

I carefully covered my pie and followed Graham and Adam out of the house and to the car. Adam pulled open the passenger side door and waited for me. I handed him the pie and then slid into the middle seat beside Graham. Adam dropped the pie in my lap as he got into the truck and pulled the door closed.

"Adam," I grumbled, pulling back the foil slightly to check on the pie. "I need to be careful with this."

He, of course, ignored me.

"I'll do my best with the bumps," Graham said with a grin before throwing the truck in reverse and backing out of the driveway.

To his credit, Graham did seem to be taking it easy on the way to my parents' house. He slowed the truck more over the bumps and around corners than he usually did, but the truck still shook more than I would have liked.

"How's the pie?" Graham asked after parking the car in the driveway.

"Who cares about the fucking pie?" Adam snapped, getting out of the truck and leaving the door open.

"Jesus Christ, what is his issue?" I asked, shaking my head as I slid out of the truck. Graham came around to the passenger side and shut the door, the two of us walking side by side behind Adam up to the house.

"I don't know what his problem is," Graham replied.

I slowed down, causing Graham to match my pace. Adam went into the house without looking back at us.

"You don't think he knows about us, do you?" I asked him, gripping the pie tighter. I had no idea how Graham would react to even the possibility of that being true.

"I don't think so," Graham said. "I think he'd be a little more hostile if that were the case."

I wanted to ask him if it would bother him if Adam knew, but it didn't seem like the time or place to put him on the spot about it. This thing between us was still pretty new. It would be crazy for me to ask Graham to be okay with telling Adam at this point. We didn't even know if this was going anywhere serious, though I hoped it would.

"Rowan, I don't think there's anything to worry about," Graham said, pulling me from my thoughts. "Let's head inside before he really starts getting suspicious."

We were immediately greeted by Mom when the two of us walked inside.

"My boys!" she exclaimed, giving us each a hug and a kiss on the cheek. "What's this?"

"I made a pie," I told her, holding it out. "Hopefully it survived in there."

"Wonderful, I'm sure it's perfect," Mom said, taking the pie from me before leading us to the kitchen.

A tense smile appeared on my face. I still felt guilty for not telling my mother about what went on with Brendon recently. It felt like all she did was worry about me. Part of me wanted to just tell her, but the other part wanted to conceal it from her to save her the worry.

I could smell the food as we entered the kitchen. Mom had a lasagna cooking in the oven and it smelled like heaven. My mother's lasagna was one of my favorite dishes of hers. It was one of the first meals I helped her cook, so it held a special place in my heart. And it was devastatingly delicious.

Cade and his tutor Miles were already sitting at the kitchen table with their laptops in front of them, presumably working on Cade's summer studies. Cade was leaning over, looking at Miles's computer instead of his own.

"Cade, I told you to set the table," Mom said, sending a stern look his way.

"I will, I will, we're just working on this last problem," he replied.

I walked over to where the two of them were sitting. Miles had what looked like to be physics work pulled up on his laptop while Cade's screen was playing a baseball game.

"Looks like you're working hard there, Cade," I said, causing my younger brother to turn around and glare at me.

"I'm multitasking," he replied as Miles shook his head beside him.

"More like wasting Miles's time," I retorted. Miles looked up at me, surprised. It was almost like he thought he had gone unseen up until that moment.

"Miles is my friend, we like spending time together," Cade responded, shutting his laptop as he stood up from his seat.

Graham, who was leaning up against the counter, stepped to the side so Cade could get to the dishes in the cabinet. I went beside Graham, opening up the drawer to gather silverware.

As Cade and I set the table, Miles gathered his things and moved Cade's laptop so he could place the plates down.

"You're staying for dinner, right?" Cade asked him quietly, setting a plate down in front of him.

"I was going to text my dad to pick me up," Miles replied, even more quiet than Cade.

"No, stay."

Graham came over to the table with the pan of lasagna in his oven-mitt covered hands while my mother followed him with a mat she put down on the center of the table. He placed the lasagna down on the mat as my mother went back to the counter to grab a knife.

"I've missed this lasagna," Graham said, coming to stand beside me.

"I can make one almost like it," I told him. "But nothing's the same as Mom's."

"You should make it some time," he said. "Just because it's not the same doesn't mean it's not just as good.

I didn't have a chance to respond to that before Dad and Adam walked into the kitchen and sat down in their usual seats. Dad sat to the right of the head of the table, leaving that seat to Mom. She was always the one to sit at the head of the table. Adam sat beside him.

"Miles, sit and eat, would ya?" Dad said, causing Miles to stare at him with wide eyes.

"Yes, sir," he replied, sitting down across from Dad, which was where I usually sat, but I wasn't about to make the kid move and freak him out even more.

"None of that sir shit, Chuck is fine," Dad said, waving him off before serving himself a slice of lasagna.

"Yes... Chuck..." Miles said, sounding uncomfortable as he did.

Cade sat beside his friend which left Graham and me to take the next two seats beside Adam. Graham stood up to serve himself a piece of lasagna, then placed one on my plate as well. I spared a brief glance over at Adam, but he seemed too focused on eating to notice anything about Graham and me.

"Rowan, what's the plan for your birthday? What do you want to do?" Mom asked after she sat down. My birthday was only about a week and a half away, but I hadn't thought about it at all until this moment.

I glanced over at her with her excited and expectant expression.

"Oh, well, I wasn't really planning on doing anything," I told her. There was really nothing for me to do or anything I wanted to do.

"Of course, we're going to celebrate your birthday," Mom responded with a pointed look. "Wanna do a cake here? Just family? Or you could invite your friends too."

Little did she know that the only friends I had were my boss and Graham, if he could even be considered a friend.

"There's no need," I said. I was only turning twenty-three It wasn't a milestone. It was nothing special. I knew my mother just wanted to do something for me because I had had a rough time lately.

"Rowan-"

"Gem, don't press him," Dad interjected. "If he doesn't want to do anything, don't make him. It's his birthday."

"Okay, fine," she relented, sending me a smile. "But if you change your mind, just let me know."

I nodded, though that wouldn't be likely. Dinner went by with more small talk, mostly between Mom and me with Dad piping in every once in a while. It felt nice to be having a family dinner since it had been so long since the last time I was here in this kitchen with them.

When the pie came out, it looked perfect and I let out a sigh of relief.

"Looks perfect," Graham said with a grin. "My truck didn't ruin it after all."

I heard Adam scoff, but chose to ignore it. I was too happy about the pie, too happy about Graham smiling at me like that to care what Adam was thinking at that moment.

"So, did you boys install that window alright? You didn't need to call the landlord?" Dad asked, then took a bite of pie.

"What window?" Mom chimed in and my stomach dropped.

"There was just a crack in my window," I rushed out before anyone else could respond. "No big deal. Graham put in a new window for me. It's good

as new."

Graham rested his leg against mine, a way of comforting me the only way he could at that moment.

Adam glanced over at me, but didn't say anything, keeping his promise to me that we would keep what happened to ourselves.

After we ate some pie, Adam, Graham, and I hopped in the truck to go home. Adam and Graham talked loudly over the wind from the open windows about some job they had to finish at work the next day while I sat between the two of them for the short drive home.

Graham pulled into his usual spot and the three of us got out of the truck, me sliding out on the passenger side after Adam.

On the front porch, I noticed a box as we walked toward the house. Adam picked it up, read the label, then tossed it toward Graham who almost dropped it because he wasn't paying attention.

"Oh, this must be the ring camera," Graham said as he looked down at the box.

"You bought a ring camera?" I asked, turning to face him. "What for?"

"To have footage in case someone decides to come by the house again," he replied, tearing open the box.

"You're going to set it up now?"

Graham nodded and walked up to the house.

"You can help me figure out where the best spot for it is," Graham said, looking down at me as I stood at the bottom of the porch steps. "We need to make sure there's a good view toward the road too."

I smiled at him, suddenly feeling the warmth of Graham's care. It made me feel giddy inside like I was some kid getting excited over my crush being nice to me. He made me feel that way without even trying.

"You're sweet," I said, walking up the steps and briefly placing my hand on his shoulder.

Graham shrugged at me like he always did. I once found that annoying, but now it was endearing. When Graham shrugged, it wasn't because he was indifferent or unsure. It was his way of agreeing, of downplaying of his contributions, of brushing off a compliment, his "no problem," his "that's life!" That gesture could communicate so many things, and I was beginning to understand him even more.

"I was thinking we could go on that date this weekend," Graham said after a moment, his voice low and quiet. I developed goose bumps from the sound. "Adam's going out tomorrow night. Do you have plans?"

I leaned back against the railing, pretending to think about his question. We both knew I had no plans. I never had plans.

"I'll have to think about that," I joked.

"Oh yeah?" he asked, stepping closer to me. "You got another hot date?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" I teased, grinning up at him. "I think I could squeeze you in though."

"I'm honored," he said, his grin matching mine. He was standing too close to me, too close for a "just friends" excuse to work on Adam were he to find us out here.

Graham looked like he was going to kiss me. His eyes zeroed in on my lips and he leaned in closer. I knew I shouldn't let him. We were out in the open and Adam could walk out here or see us through the window. I wasn't necessarily scared of Adam finding out; I was scared of what Graham's reaction would be.

I swallowed that fear down and let Graham's lips meet mine.

**

Thanks for reading!

Sorry about the long wait. I took a nice long break and had a little bit of writer's block. Thanks for your patience!